

# **Oh, to Be a Man: Women, Sexuality, and Male Fantasy in H. E. Bates' Larkin Novels**

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Pro gradu – tutkielma käsittelee naisten asemaa, seksuaalisuutta, miesten ja naisten välistä suhdetta sekä maskuliinista fantasiaa H. E. Batesin viidessä Larkin-romaanissa, jotka on kirjoitettu vuosina 1958-1970. Tutkielman teemoja tarkastellaan enimmäkseen feministisen teorian kautta, mutta myös historia on näkökulmana läsnä. Tutkielma pyrkii selvittämään, kuinka Larkin-sarjan hahmot vastustavat tai myötäilevät aikansa sosiaalisia normeja, kuinka romaanit kuvaavat varsinkin naisten seksuaalisuutta, ja millä tavoin romaanit ovat maskuliinisen fantasian ilmentymiä.

Larkin-romaanit sijoittuvat 1950- ja 1960-luvuille, ja niitä tarkastellaan näiden aikakausien valossa. 1950-luku oli Britanniassa monenlaisten muutosten aikaa: maa oli toipumassa toisesta maailmansodasta, ja ihmiset kokivat muun muassa köyhyyttä. Seksuaalisuus oli erittäin yksityinen asia, mutta oli kuitenkin murroksessa, ja uudet ajatukset seksistä ja sen merkityksestä alkoivat muotoutua. 1960-luvun loppuun mennessä ajatusmaailma oli vapautuneempi esimerkiksi esiaviollisen seksin suhteen, vaikka moni kannattikin vielä perinteisiä perhearvoja.

Romaanit ovat humoristisia ja keveitä, mutta pintatason alla ne kommentoivat aikansa yhteiskuntaa. Tämän pohjalta tutkielmassa ovat teemoina muun muassa avioliitto, neitsyys ja uskollisuus. Larkin-romaanit sisältävät lukuisia naishahmoja, joiden ulkonäköä kuvaillaan runsaasti niin hyvässä kuin pahassakin. Seksuaalisuus on yksi suurimmista teemoista sekä romaaneissa että tutkielmassa, ja kaikkia aiheita käsitellään sen kautta.

Tutkielmassa käy ilmi, että Larkin-romaanit ovat sekä aikaansa edellä moderneine ajatuksineen seksuaalisuudesta ja ihmissuhteista, mutta toisaalta taas oman aikansa tuotoksia naisihanteineen ja patriarkalisine arvoineen. Naiset ovat romaaneissa sekä moderneja ja vahvoja että miehistä riippuvaisia ja passiivisia. Romaanit esittävät seksuaalisuudesta sekä positiivisen ja progressiivisen kuvan omaan aikaansa nähden että vahvistavat 1950- ja 1960-lukujen konservatiivista ilmapiiriä. Naishahmojen arvo ja viehätysvoima määräytyy heidän seksuaalisuutensa kautta, ja kauniit naiset kuvataan myös luonteeltaan mukaviksi, kun taas vähemmän viehättävät naishahmot ovat luonteeltaan arkoja tai epämiellyttäviä. Tutkielman teemat sävyttyvät maskuliinisen ihanteen mukaan ja naisten vahvuus tai itsenäisyys on suhteessa patriarkaliseen yhteiskuntaan; naiset saavat olla avoimesti seksuaalisia, kunhan se ei uhkaa maskuliinisuutta.

Avainsanat: H. E. Bates, Larkin, seksuaalisuus, feminismi, Britannia, parisuhde

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## 1. Introduction

In this thesis I will examine women, sexuality, the male-female relationship, and male fantasy in H. E. Bates' Larkin novels, which comprise five books written from 1958 to 1970. The first of the books, *The Darling Buds of May*, has a very liberal take on marriage and sexuality, for the time of writing; I have previously studied women and sexuality in said book in my Bachelor's Thesis, "A Changing Society: Women and Sexuality in H. E. Bates' *The Darling Buds of May*". Therefore I will now expand my research to the whole series instead of merely one novel, and focus my attention more on the relationship between men and women and the aspect of male fantasy.

Very little has been academically written on the Larkin novels, which is regrettable due to the controversial nature of the books and the underlying, often provocative or progressive, themes on society they contain. There have been prior studies on Bates' other work – mainly focused on the atmosphere or depictions of nature in his writing, which have an important role in most of his stories. The Larkin novels, however, are mostly overlooked and merely glanced upon in said contexts. While the novels were very popular at the time of their writing, as well as since, being adapted into a successful TV-series in the 1990s, they are not regarded high enough as pieces of literature – not even by the author himself (Baldwin 198) – to be considered important in any other way than as a form of entertainment. This is why I want to examine the novels further.

The novels in the Larkin series are fairly short and often considered light-hearted and fun without anything more to them; "serious critics pulled long faces and scolded H. E. for writing a silly and naughty book", but the author "was having far too much fun . . . to care a bit" (Baldwin 199). This is a good general summary of the style of the novels – fun to read, but certainly nothing phenomenal in literary terms. Beneath the airy surface, however, I believe the novels make some heavy statements about the society and its rules, questioning morals which were, and in some cases still are, prevalent in Great Britain. These include marriage and its importance, and virginity and its

standing in the society of the novels' day and in ours, to name a couple. This is why these stories are worth studying – their surface might seem simple, but underneath they are socially critical and even advanced for their time. However, they are also deeply connected to the values and morals of their time. They both provide a positive take on sexuality for the time of their writing, and a conservative view of the world at the same time. Whether the author intended this is unknown, but they are still present.

The novels include a great number of female characters, all of whose descriptions are plentiful – whether they are positive or negative. The appearance of the characters is always described in detail, especially if they are attractive. This becomes a prominent factor in the stories, and not least because usually the character's worth and appeal as a person is defined by their appearance and behaviour: sexually liberated and beautiful women are, in general, portrayed as pleasant to be with and nice, whereas the non-attractive ones do not have vibrant personalities to make up for what they seem to lack in looks. Sex (and everything connected to it) is also a major feature in the storytelling, and in connection with the multiple descriptions of the women, becomes almost a measure of what is healthy and good for women.

In addition to the sexualized treatment of the women in the series, the novels depict other socially controversial themes as well, such as the Larkins' eldest daughter's illegitimate pregnancy, Mr and Mrs Larkin not being married, and general dallying about outside of wedlock – or, in the Larkins' case, outside of a solid relationship. Fidelity is one of the key themes, since Mr Larkin flirts with and courts every woman in sight, and Mrs Larkin has no problem with this. This, among other things, brings up the question of whether the male characters in the novels live in a strange kind of paradise, where one can have both a good, steady relationship and a family, and plenty of other women as well – is it all a masculine dream?

In the light of these matters, therefore, I aim to answer the following questions in my thesis:

- How do the relationships in the Larkin novels conform to or oppose the societal norms of the 1950s and 1960s?

- How do the novels portray sexuality, and especially that of women?
- In what ways are the novels manifestations of male fantasy, and how are women treated in them?

My primary material is the five Larkin novels by Bates. The series has many names, such as *The Pop Larkin Series*, *The Larkin Family Saga*, or *The Pop Larkin Chronicles*, but there does not seem to be a unanimous term used for them. This is why I have chosen to use the rather neutral “Larkin novels” (sometimes also used for the series) for them. The novels tell the story of the unconventional Larkin family, who often go against the society and believe in good food, good company, and liberal relations, from the womanizing father to the sexually confident young daughters. The series is loose on plot, but rich on characters and life: rarely is there a dilemma or a clear-cut story to solve or follow, and whatever happens in the novels is rather a series of events in the lives of the family members. There are still arching plotlines, but usually they are nothing grand, and can be described in a short manner: a tax inspector arrives, the Larkins go to France, the Larkins get neighbours from London. The novels are, more than anything, depictions of a life of a family who loves it, and lives it. This is transmitted to the reader through plentiful descriptions of summer, nature, food, and merrymaking.

The first novel in the series, *The Darling Buds of May* (1958), was first published in the United States (Baldwin 198), and evoked sharp commentary from its contemporary readers. The characters were called “moral degenerates”, the story “idiotic”, and *Saturday Evening Post* – the paper in which the story was serialized – was thought to have “hit rock bottom” (Coleman et al. 4). However, it also received much positive feedback, being called a “gem”, and written with “real heart and a love of humanity” (Coleman et al. 4). Indeed, the story became very successful in the United States, and did very well in Britain, having sold 40,000 copies in only two months after its publication (Baldwin 198-199), paving way for the rest of the series. This also alludes to the overall duality of the novels; people both loved it, and hated it, and much of this is due to the unconventional manners of the Larkins. One

reader directly expressed her horror of the teenage pregnancy, and strongly disapproved of the humorous way in which it was portrayed (Coleman et al. 4).

I will approach my subject mainly through history and feminist theory; the former is crucial in order to understand the context of the novels, as it is necessary to be aware of the society the characters in the novels either defy or support. The importance of the latter is emphasized when examining female portrayal and the male-female relationship. I will also look into studies on sexuality, not just regarding women, but more general takes on the matter in connection to virginity, for example.

The history of relationships, female rights, and sexuality in Great Britain during the two decades the novels take place will be shortly looked into, starting from the late 1950s through the 1960s. I will examine the key themes found in the novels through feminist theory and historical points of view: sexuality and male-female companionship, which entail concepts such as fidelity, virginity, and power. I will end with male fantasy and patriarchy, and how the series both liberates female sexuality but at the same time reflects the matter from a masculine and unequal viewpoint engraved in the Western society.

My thesis is aimed to provide a look into a series of novels which is often regarded as nothing but simple entertainment, and on my part fill the gap in the studies conducted of the series, which so far is greatly lacking. The novels have an angle of duality, where everything has two sides – they are progressive, but conservative; liberating to women, but not truly speaking for their equality; speaking for freedom, but confining the characters to narrow circles. There are also many tie-ins to our time, as the majority of the themes I will examine are still issues today, although their form may have changed.

## 2. The Novels and the Main Characters

In this chapter I will introduce the five Larkin novels and summarise their plots briefly in order to give a better context to the themes I will examine. This will include a summary of the main themes in the novels, since a straightforward plot is often not available. However, I will draw attention to the themes which are relevant to this thesis. In addition, the key characters in the novels will also be introduced and their importance in regards of the themes in this thesis will be looked into.

### 2.1 An Introduction to the Novels

*The Darling Buds of May* (1958, DBM for citation) starts the story of the lively Larkin family who, led by the unmarried parents of six, Sydney “Pop” and Flo “Ma” Larkin, receive an unwelcome visit from the tax office in the form of Mr Charlton. The laid-back life of the countryside, and the Larkins’ beautiful daughter, Mariette, quickly lure Mr Charlton, or “Charley”, in and returning back to London and to his work is suddenly not as important as enjoying his life in the country. By the end of the novel, he and Mariette decide to get married and Ma Larkin is revealed to be expecting her seventh child. The novel has a rather liberal take on matters such as sexuality and marriage for its time of writing, and themes in *The Darling Buds of May* range from fidelity to virginity. The emphasis is on Mariette and Mr Charlton’s budding relationship and her attempts at seducing him, and her apparent desire to find a father for her unborn child.

The next book in the series, *A Breath of French Air* (1959, BFA for citation) picks the story up about a year after the first instalment; Mariette and Mr Charlton are married, the Larkins have a new-born son, and it is yet again summer. Since the weather is looking glum, the family decides to escape the rain to France for a few weeks. After initial problems with the French weather and food, the Larkin’s start to find their place in the country and enjoy themselves. Mariette and Mr Charlton try to sort out their marital problems, one of which being the lack of a baby and Mariette’s seeming



disinterest in her husband, while Pop meets Angela Snow, his crush from the previous novel. He also charms the hotel owner, Mademoiselle Dupont. The story further expands the liberal take on fidelity and through that, marriage. Much of the focus in the novel is on the differences between the English and the French culture, played to humorous effect.

*When the Green Woods Laugh* (1960, GWL for citation) opens with a London couple, Mr and Mrs Jerebohm, coming to purchase a property from Pop, the old but impressing Gore Court. The Jerebohms are ill-suited for country life, and find it hard to fit in, especially since the life they dreamed of is far removed from the actual reality. The novel has a satirical take on the differences between the city people and the country folk, much in the favour of the latter. Pop's often shameless flirtatious ways receive attention absent from any of the previous novels: his advances on Mrs Pinkie Jerebohm take him to court for sexual assault. Mariette and Mr Charlton are still without a child, which concerns Ma and Pop greatly. The key issue in the story, aside from the differences between the city and the country, is the accusation of sexual assault, and how the novel treats Mrs Jerebohm and Pop in regard of it.

*Oh! To Be in England* (1963, OTE for citation) introduces a peculiar patriotic and religious tone absent from the previous novels. Violent youth gangs are on the rise, and pieces of the good old England are slowly crumbling away. The religious aspect is difficult to explain, since Bates had given up Christianity when he was young (Baldwin 162) and there does not seem to be any apparent reason for this take on the story. While religion is not the focus of my thesis, I believe the matter is important to acknowledge, because much with the concept of sexuality and relationship is now affected by a religious tone. This comes up most in the small details in the last two novels: characters refer to the Bible and are suddenly more open about God, to the point of contradicting their opinions from previous novels. All the Larkin children get baptised, in addition to Mariette and Mr Charlton's baby boy, and a priest character is added into the canon. However, the religiousness does not prevent such controversial subjects as age of consent from appearing, when the Larkins' second-eldest daughter,

Primrose, starts seriously pursuing the priest and manages to mess with his head, despite being only 14 years old. I will not dwell on religion significantly, except in places where the actions of the characters are in deep contrast with their previous actions, if necessary.

*A Little of What You Fancy* (1970, LWYF for citation) steers the already liberal sexual overtones in the series to another level. The novel opens with intimate moments with Ma and Pop, which then result in Pop having a heart attack. For most of the novel, he is bedridden and depressive, and much of the attention in the novel is given to Primrose's attempts at seducing Mr Candy, the priest. Pop takes action only when a road to the planned tunnel between Britain and France is said to go straight through his property, destroying his home. The latter half of the novel focuses on this dilemma and the family's, and their friends', attempts to solve it to their advantage. The gap between *A Little of What You Fancy* and *Oh! To Be in England* is seven years, and the changing of the times is reflected in the novel with such things as mini-skirts and birth control pills, both of which I will examine in connection with women. The novel is very sexual in its tone, in keeping with the changing of decades and attitudes.

With the Larkin novels, one must keep in mind that they are humorous in tone. There is also an element of social satire in the novels, especially in *When the Green Woods Laugh* as Baldwin also mentions; this is, however, mostly evident in differences between town and country. (Baldwin 205) It is not always simple to distinguish what is supposed to be satirical and what is not, since Bates did not write the novels because he wanted to write satire; the Larkin series was "a profitable diversion and a harmless fantasy" (Baldwin 220) to him, and it was certainly not taken as a serious attempt at anything more than that during its time, as previously mentioned.

There are, however, some clear examples of social commentary in the novels. According to Baldwin, Bates himself "believed that the novels were legitimate social commentary, exaggerated to be sure, but with an element of genuine truth" (220). However, as mentioned, Baldwin also says that the very same novels were merely a fantasy and a diversion to the author, a break from more serious

work. From this slight controversy about the novels, it can be deduced that opinions are somewhat divided. Bates did, however, think that the characters in the novels represented reality, “genuine English types who reflected changes that had occurred in the countryside since the war” (Baldwin 219). This is clearly visible in the novels with previously wealthy or well-off characters having to struggle with money and taxes, and who are near poverty. Throughout the series the working-class Larkins have more wealth and happiness than those who are middle-class or higher, and the “better” people constantly have to give up their possessions and realty when money is short; an example of this is Lady Violet in *Oh! To Be in England*. She is selling her Regency furniture to Pop, and he muses about the situation:

It was the same feeling he got sometimes when he was talking to his old friend the Brigadier. It hurt him to see the top people coming down so low. He could remember without difficulty the time when Lady Violet and her family had lived in a big black-and-white half-timbered house with a moat round it and great splendid stables and farm-barns as dignified as old cathedrals. He supposed change was inevitable but there were times when he didn't hold with it being so drastic, especially here in England. (OTE 3)

In addition to the social commentary there are, however, loose themes to each novel which might be the sources of satire, when present: In *The Darling Buds of May*, this would be the clash of worlds when the uptight Mr Charlton meets the careless Larkins; in *A Breath of French Air* it is the differences between the English and the French, and the prejudices of the Larkins; *When the Green Woods Laugh* has already been mentioned, and *Oh! To Be in England* deals with changing times and the passing of England as it once was, although the tone is more nostalgic than satirical. *A Little of What You Fancy* brings up health issues and what is good for you in the end: a strict healthy life to avoid damage to one's body, but what inevitably depresses a person, or a little of what you fancy to keep your spirits up and make life worth living, despite it not being what the doctor ordered. When it comes to sexuality and portrayals of the relationships between the characters, the issues stay the same throughout the series, and seem to be free from too much satire. However, it must be kept in mind that a lot of the things going on in the novels are often played for laughs, and are probably not meant to be taken too seriously. Regardless, comedy is not exempt from analysis, and simply because

something is meant to be humorous does not make it immune to any kind of commentary; despite of the genre of a text, certain attitudes, opinions, and actions are transmitted to the reader, and the way those are portrayed has always an impact, as the text inevitably becomes a part of literature.

## **2.2 The Key Characters in the Series**

To understand the portrayal and manifestations of sexuality, especially in connection with women in the novels, one must be acquainted with the women who have crucial roles in it. In this section I will focus on the main female characters and the ones who have a recurring role, and examine the ways they use their sexuality, and how that is in contrast, or in unison, with the society. I will also examine the character of Pop, as he is seen as the main character of the series and the one who all the women, one way or another, relate to. There are many female characters other than the main ones in the series who deserve to be mentioned in this thesis due to their portrayal as sexual, or non-sexual, beings, and I will address them in the sections that most relate to them. In this section I will draw the focus on those women who either have a recurring role in the series, or who otherwise have a major role in one way or another.

The first woman examined is Florence “Ma” Larkin, starting as the mother of six in her mid-thirties, with eight children by the end of the series. She is almost the ideal housewife of the 1950s and even the 1960s: she is responsible for all the cooking, the cleaning, and most of the childcare. She does not have a job, nor does she interfere with the use of money in the family, lest it be connected to sustenance. She would be the “perfect” housewife, were her manners not so crude and her personality so vibrant. She is “a great royalist” (LWYF 140) as well as interested in the horoscopes. She is uneducated herself, and her stand on education is deeply suspicious: “. . . Ma said she wouldn’t be at all surprised if it wasn’t education. She’d always said you never knew where it would land you if you let it get on top of you. There was altogether too much of it nowadays” (LWYF 187).

A recurring theme with Ma is her size. She is described as a very large woman, which is often played for humorous effect, but she is completely fine with it herself: “She liked her figure as it was and was going to keep it that way. It was all hers, wasn’t it? All 55-55-55 of it.” (LWYF 75) Ma is a woman who is remarkably confident in her own body, despite it not being something the current-to-her-time beauty ideals might endorse. It is not a touchy subject with her, and she is not beyond making fun of it herself. Descriptions of her are dual in nature; on one hand her large size is often emphasized and made fun of, but on the other she is depicted as a beautiful woman regardless. A good example of this duality is the very first description of her:

Ma shook all over, laughing like a jelly. Little rivers of yellow, brown, and pinkish-purple cream were running down over her huge lardy hands. In her handsome big black eyes the cloudless blue May sky was reflected, making them dance as she threw out the splendid bank of her bosom, quivering under its salmon jumper. At thirty-five she still had a head of hair like black silk cotton, curly and thick as it fell to her fat olive shoulders. Her stomach and thighs bulged like a hop-sack under the tight brown skirt and in her remarkably small delicate cream ears her round pearl-drop earrings trembled like young white cherries. (DBM 1-2)

She is described in both derogatory terms – fat, lardy, with bulging thighs – and also in praising ones; her ears are delicate, her hair silky, her eyes handsome. Ma’s size does not make her undesirable or repulsive to her life partner, who expresses fondness, desire, and lust for her. She is a classical embodiment of fertility and sexual ability; the ancient goddess statues of fertility are very similar to her, large and shapely. She is even described in the light of what natural beauty should be: “... her figure was all her own; pure and natural as could be” (DBM 41). Ma’s size is a constant joke in the novels, and she even gets stuck in a chair in France. Her treatment in the series can also be seen as a statement – she does not portray the beauty ideals at the time, and it is made very clear, yet she is sexual and beautiful in her own way. She does not need to be thin or extremely docile to be attractive – she can fully be her own, confident self, and still appeal to men. Beauty is, therefore, not universal, and there is no single standard for what being beautiful is. This can also be seen as satire of the beauty ideals of the 1950s and the 1960s, as Ma so clearly defies this standard of beauty and yet is alluring.

Ma's relationship with sexuality is very open. She likes sex greatly herself, and never judges anyone for having it. However, she does not care for the word "sex" or its portrayal in the media:

Not that she and Pop ever discussed things like that. They never in fact ever used the word sex. They enjoyed a bit of indulgence and all that now and then but that was what it was for, wasn't it? Not to talk about. . . . After all there was sex and sex. It was one thing to hear and read about it, and even see it, on television; it was quite another matter what you did in your own home. She and Pop knew that it was all right without bandying a lot of words about it in public. There was an awful lot of bare bosoms and people in bed together naked and a lot of squirming about and biting and all that and there were times, watching television, when she didn't think it was very nice. It struck her as being sort of immoral. (LWYF 69)

Ma seems to be of the opinion that sex is a private matter which is not suitable to discuss in public. She represents very liberal ideas when it comes to actions, as she loves sex and never reprimands her daughters or Pop for having it, but she is very conservative when it comes to talking about sex and everything related to it.

The Larkins' eldest child, the at the time of *The Darling Buds of May* 17-year-old daughter Mariette, seems to fit every beauty ideal imaginable. This also holds true from *Oh! To Be in England* onwards with the second eldest daughter, Primrose. Their physical appearance is often described in detail: everything from the scent around the two daughters to their physical features is given much time and space within the novels, and everything about them is always extremely alluring. Their sexual behaviour is extremely liberal. At the beginning of *The Darling Buds of May*, Mariette is revealed to be pregnant (although it later turns out to be a false alarm), and she cannot decide who the father is. This, naturally, implies an active sex life, and to her, sex seems not to be such a taboo as it was often seen during the time. She thinks about it casually, and does not dwell on any moral or societal dilemmas of it: "Mariette felt the sweetness of it tingling madly in her nostrils and remembered the kiss she had given Mr Charlton. She was sorry for Mr Charlton and wondered if it would ever be possible to make love with him. Making love might ease his mind" (DBM 66). To her, sex is fun and not in connection with possible future relationships she might have with her sexual partners; in fact, one of the men she thinks might be her child's father is married.

When Mr Charlton enters the story, Mariette is not hesitant to make a move. Her reason for the sudden seduction of a complete stranger is very possibly the need to find a father for her unborn child, but it can also be considered a way to distract him from investigating the family's tax situation. Nevertheless, Mariette has a goal and she is willing to work to attain it. Her methods of doing so are very obvious and very effective. Mariette even goes so far as to sit on Mr Charlton's lap in a very suggestive manner the first night he stays over: "With extraordinarily soft hands Mariette took his own and held them high round her waist, just under her breasts. With stupefying tenderness she started to rock backwards and forwards on his knee, with the result that Mr Charlton could not see straight" (DBM 40). It is clear that Mariette is not afraid of her sexuality, and she knows precisely how to use it in order to get what she wants.

Primrose, aged 14 at the time of *Oh! To Be in England*, is described to be "as fully developed as a woman of twenty and every bit as well aware of it too" (OTE 28). Her sexual behaviour is even more forward and obvious than Mariette's. She too has an active sex life by the last novel: "Nature had in fact several times so taken its course with Primrose, so aptly named, that Ma had been mildly disturbed by several false alarms, until Primrose had told Ma not to worry, the Pill was taking care of that." (LWYF 45) Primrose is named after a flower, or rather, after several, as her full name is *Primrose Violet Anemone Iris Magnolia Narcissa*. Her tendency to be liberal and very natural with her behaviour and sexuality can be seen as something that her name forebodes – as nature is often seen as feminine, so are flowers. Ma says Primrose's names describe her well: "Primrose one minute, Violet the next, Narcissa the next – you can see it all in her eyes. She's several people in one, our Primrose." (OTE 87) So while Primrose is young and therefore assumedly innocent like one type of a flower, she can also be beautiful, intoxicating, and tempting like another.

Both Mariette and Primrose are very active characters, sexually and otherwise. They are not passive in this regard, and although one could argue that Mariette is doing all her seducing because she has an ulterior motive and so is "forced" to do so, one must also bear in mind that she has

experience of men, and that she has most likely used the very same methods before solely because she wanted to. In *The Darling Buds of May*, Mariette is the one initiating almost all sexual interaction, to the point where Ma is displeased with Mr Charlton's passive nature. This also holds true with Primrose's behaviour in *Oh! To Be in England* and *A Little of What You Fancy*, where her seducing the timid priest Mr Candy plays out much like Mariette's seducing ways with Mr Charlton – but Primrose's motives seem to be simply her desire for the priest, and her claim of being in love with him.

While Ma, Mariette, and Primrose are described as sexual and fertile women, Miss Edith Pilchester is given opposite attention. She lives on her own, never been married as far as the reader is to know. Descriptions of her are less than favourable; she is “a fortyish, slightly moustached brunette shaped like a bolster” (DBM 90), someone who Pop muses he had “never given ... better than a 300-1 chance in a beauty contest” (LWYF 61). She has passed her sexual peak, and yet longs for it – Edith is someone Pop frequently flirts with and even kisses a few times. These shows of affection from Pop mean much to Edith, who, however, does not evoke any sexual desires in Pop. It can be said that she is a charity case of affection: after Pop kisses her the first time, Ma inquires him whether he did so. He admits this, and Ma merely says, “I thought you would. . . . Do her good. Make her sleep all the sweeter.” (DBM 103) To Edith, the kisses and caresses Pop gives her are the highlights of her day, but Pop finds little to no pleasure in the act. When Ma asks him how kissing Edith was, he laughingly says that it was “a bit like trying to catch a mole ... in a dark entry.” (DBM 103) She is sexually restrained and timid, and needs Pop to bring out her sexual side.

Mrs Pinkie Jerebohm, only present in *When the Green Woods Laugh* but a crucial character nonetheless, differs from Edith in that she is described as a moderately good-looking woman, even if her manners and style do not really fit the countryside – she is “plumpish, chalky pink about the face and pretty in a half-simpering rosebud sort of way” (GWL 4). Mrs Jerebohm is on a constant diet, trying to shed what she considers extra pounds; this involves eating dieting pills, and very little of



anything else, and doing exercise movements every evening before going to bed. She is quite happily married and dreams of a luxurious life in a country manor, with servants, parties, and high-class life. She is not, however, anywhere near as sexually open and liberal as Ma, Mariette, or Primrose, for example. She does not react well to Pop's eventual advances, which cause her distress. Mrs Jerebohm and Pop will be examined in detail in section 4.1 and in chapter 6.

The introduction to Angela Snow occurs late into *The Darling Buds of May*. She appears in a party the Larkins hold, and immediately enchants Pop: "A tall aristocratically fair girl, so fair that her hair was almost barley-white, with a figure like a reed and enormous pellucid olive eyes, had Pop so transfixed that, for a moment, he was almost unnerved. He had never seen her, or anyone like her, before" (DBM 127). Angela is confident, beautiful – often described as elegant and languid – and playful at the same time; she is a "kindred spirit" (BFA 63) to Pop. Angela Snow drinks like a man, has a fondness for practical jokes, like Pop, and has a generally mischievous nature much alike to him. She is the daughter of Sir John Furlington-Snow, a Queen's Counsel – a man much like her, if only bolder. She has one sibling, Iris, whom shall be discussed in section 4.3, and who drastically differs from her. Unlike her sister, Angela is sexually open and easy-going, one to flirt often and talk about sex freely. She is often the one who Pop flirts with the most, and is one of his best friends. Descriptions of her are always positive; her beauty and enchanting looks are always emphasized, and everything about her is flawless.

Sydney, or Sidney (both spellings are used in the novels), Larkin, mainly known as just "Pop", is a lively father to his large brood and a proud owner of his property, which to others is little more than a junk yard. He is "thin, sharp, quick-eyed, jocular, and already going shining bald on top, with narrow brown side-linings to make up for it" (DBM 2). The loves of his life are his family, his home, and a fair bit of alcohol and other women. He is not illiterate, but cannot write; despite of this, he has a cunning eye to business and money. He is a very enterprising person, and deals with "junk" for living: he buys things cheap, and sells them with a profit.

While Ma is very skeptical about education, Pop is constantly amazed by it. He is stunned by his son-in-law's knowledge, and admires him for it. He is eager to learn new things, from new cocktail recipes to the French language. Pop and his behaviour will be further examined later in the thesis, as he is a central character and very closely connected to all the themes examined in this thesis. However, a brief summary of him is in order: Pop is sexually active and liberal, like most characters in the series. He likes flirting with other women, and kissing and caressing them. His relationship with Ma is secure, and he enjoys having sex with her as well. Throughout the series he sees no wrong in his actions, and is genuinely perplexed if others react badly to what he thinks is good-natured pinching or friendly dallying.

The characters are, in keeping with the humorous tone of the novels, exaggerated, but still representative of their own time. Ma is both a comic relief and a jab at the general beauty ideals; Mariette and Primrose seem to embody the changing of the times, which includes sexual liberation especially with women. There is also the element of how people behave versus how they are expected to behave with the characters; Edith is a good example of this. She is restrained, like women were often expected to be, and sexually shy, but deep down she too is a sexual being who needs intimacy. On the outside she is an honourable Englishwoman, but on the inside she is what everyone sometimes is. Mariette, Primrose, and select other female characters seem to portray only the inner side of women – they do not try to keep up any appearances, and are just as sexual as they wish to be, no matter what society thinks of them because of it. Characters like Mariette and Primrose could therefore be exaggerated versions of the modern female; more assertive and more sexual.

### **3. The 1950s and the 1960s – Decades of Subtle Change**

In this chapter I will briefly look into the historical context of the 1950s and the 1960s, during which the Larkin novels were written. The general atmosphere of the two decades will be examined, such as the effects of World War II, but the focus will mostly be on what women were going through that

time, and how the ideas of sexuality were treated during the time period in question. The state of affairs in relation to the Larkin novels will also be discussed in brief.

During World War II, the working public of Great Britain met with significant changes. Before the war, the men were the ones to go to work and provide for their families, while the women were more or less tied to the home, although working-class women most often did work outside the home in addition to doing household chores (Rahman & Jackson 21). However, World War II brought along obvious changes to this division of spheres: a large proportion of the working men were drafted and spent even years in the army. This meant a shortage of labour in many areas of industry, and so it was the women who took the place of the men in the work force. Generally, life in the post-war Britain was hard for many, as after the ravages of war there were 4,000,000 apartments too few in Britain. (“For Better, For Worse”) The Larkin novels portray the post-war era, and it is occasionally referenced to. The changes in people’s wealth is also brought up with mentions of characters who used to live much more comfortably than they now do.

In many respects, the war years were a time of equality for women: they did what the men used to do, and were capable of doing it. It is because of the new kind of liberty they received that it was very difficult for some to let it all go after the war was over. Suddenly the men came back and the women were expected to return to their “own world” of housekeeping and childcare. Of course, some women did remain in the work force and were encouraged to do so (Lewis 152), because many men never came back, and there was still shortage in the labour force. Still, the number of female workers dropped dramatically after the war was over, and “by 1951 women’s economic activity rate was almost exactly the same as that for 1931” (Lewis 148). The general view was that women should seek short-term employment before marriage rather than careers (Quinault 18), and after marriage they would not return to the work force because of the way they saw career in general: “Many women in the 1950s viewed the male career as a shared achievement: they rarely envisaged competing with men for reputation or fame, but saw the wife’s privacy and reticence as womanly” (Harrison 236). The

family ideal was a safe husband who would protect his family and earn a living, while his obedient wife stayed at home with the children. (“For Better, For Worse”) This is something that the Larkin novels also portray. Ma is said to have been a cook at a hotel at one point during her life, but is now primarily a mother and a home-maker, while Pop is the one earning a comfortable living for the family. Women were likely to stay at home partly because “the cold war atmosphere of the fifties may account for the quiescence of feminism, at a time when women’s rights were likely to be associated with masculinized Soviet women and an alien way of life” (Wilson 60). Psychologists took part in the discourse as well and “urged women to return to or remain in the home” (ibid. 64).

The views on sex and sexuality were somewhat conservative, although progress towards more liberal views was to be seen. Up to the 1930s, the view on female sexuality was that the woman was “‘naturally’ unknowing until stimulated by ‘the essential force of maleness’, which enables her to re-connect to her own ‘primitive’ biological urges” (Rahman & Jackson 16). This idea has most likely influenced the take on female sexuality for many decades; women were often seen as passive and completely free of sexual desire (Rahman & Jackson 21). This line of thought was still visible during the 1950s with the stereotype of a “docile, nurturing, and sexually monogamous female” (LeMoncheck 42), and sex was generally not discussed; however, “the attraction of sex was clearly apparent both in advertising . . . and on the streets where prostitutes openly solicited for business until the 1959 Street Offences Act” (Quinault 19). In the late 1940s and early 1950s, traditional values were strongly in place and premarital sex was a taboo; people were still quite ignorant about sex, and surprise pregnancies were common (“For Better, For Worse”), and “before the 1960s, the majority of the population – especially women – had few reliable and easily accessible sources of information about sexuality” (Bingham 53). The Larkin novels approach this issue in two ways: first, the women in the novels defy the idea of a passive female when it comes to sex, and generally the Larkins live a very liberal life, which will be further discussed in later chapters. Second, the female characters seem to be ignorant in some ways when it comes to some aspects of sexual life. This ignorance is not too

severe – Ma and her daughters are perfectly aware of how one has children, for example – but they have little to no contraception until the last novel. While sexuality was not a public matter, the late 1950s brought along more changes:

. . . full employment, increasing affluence and leisure. . . , the greater sexual availability of women outside marriage (although not publicly sanctioned), and the shift in the sex ration in favour of youthful unmarried men can be connected with a heightening of the playboy image of swinging bachelorhood and a more misogynistic, aggressively heterosexual, masculinity. (Holden 13)

This on its part hinders the progress women might have experienced during the time, and enforces male dominance.

As will be discussed later on, the Larkins' eldest daughter, Mariette, thinks she is pregnant for the most part of the first novel. Teenage pregnancy is a taboo even today, and back in the 1950s it (and illegitimacy in general) was a very serious matter. Women who had children outside of wedlock were considered “fallen”, a thought which persisted up to the 1970s (Holden 116), although in the 1950s the *fallen woman* morphed into something else:

. . . far from disappearing, the ‘fallen woman’ had taken on a new form. By the 1950s the idea that unmarried mothers, no longer widely regarded as morally defective or sinful, had psychological problems rooted in their upbringing became increasingly popular. (Holden 127)

The matter of teenage pregnancy, especially out of wedlock, was noted in regards to the novels, as well; when *The Darling Buds of May* was published in the United States in the magazine *Saturday Evening Post* in 1958, it evoked some rather heated responses from the readers: “I . . . feel that it is not only in bad taste but is downright pernicious to suggest that there’s something whimsical and charming about a seventeen-year-old girl getting herself pregnant by she isn’t sure whom, and then latching on to the first poor dope that comes along!” (Coleman et al. 4), writes Mrs Phoebe O’Hara in her letter to the editor concerning the novel. While this cannot be taken as the general view – the novel was very successful, after all – it does demonstrate the ideals prevalent in many Western societies. To say that everyone thought so would be an unfair generalization, but it is a fascinating point of view considering that the novel does not greatly focus on the alleged pregnancy.

The 1950s particularly was a time of changes in views of sex. The traditional models were still effective, but new ideals – the thought that women are allowed to enjoy sex and want it, for example – were emerging:

... by the fifties sexual potency in men and sexual responsiveness in women began to be seen as explicitly desirable qualities, emphasized for instance in such opinion moulders as the problem pages of women's magazines. ... the higher the degree of sexual ecstasy expected within a domestic relationship, the less fulfilling the life-long monogamous union appeared. The search for sexual fulfilment might indeed, it was feared, lead to promiscuity and higher divorce rates. (Wilson 66)

In the newspaper problem pages the advice given to people asking for help in relationship and sexual matters was indeed changing: in the 1940s, virginity before marriage and sexual restraint were strongly encouraged, but by the 1960s, the views were more liberal and supportive. (Bingham 55, 56)

Already in the late 1940s Dr Eustace Chesser's sex manual was published, which "went so far as to recommend and discreetly describe sexual 'foreplay'" (Harrison 238). However, according to Harrison, the most influential in both Britain and the USA was Alfred Kinsey who in 1953 published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, which shook the barrier between the ideal of the perfect woman and the reality of what unmarried mothers, for example, had to go through. (Harrison 238)

In addition to sexuality, the late 1950s was a time of change in other respects, too. The youth of the era grew up quicker than the previous generation; they were wealthier and influenced by jazz and rock. They were independent and ready to question authority. ("For Better, For Worse") As mentioned before, the Larkin novels portray a very liberal view of sexuality, and are therefore quite on par with the emerging sexual attitudes of their time. They are also commenting on the rise of the youth and its potential problems; in *Oh! To Be in England* the Larkins encounter teenage violence and disrespect for the first time.

The 1950s was a time of change in many respects, and the 1960s had a more liberal take on matters such as sexuality. The most notable change in this regard was the birth control pill. There had been birth control clinics throughout the 1950s (Harrison 244), and "attitudes in the early 1960s were particularly casual among sexually active adolescents, with fear of pregnancy usually too weak

among women for them to choose the contraceptive used” (ibid.). However, the introduction of the Pill to the public in 1961 brought a great change in the habits of many women. Initially in Britain, the Pill was given only to married women, but was made more widely available in 1967 (the NHS). It had consequences not only in the reproduction of the public, but in what it meant for women socially:

Women made it a tool for autonomy, freedom, and higher aspirations. . . . The Pill did not so much change women’s lives as enable them to make changes they longed for. Their sex was more free, their educational plans more achievable, their wage-earning more stable, their domestic labor reduced. Married women thought it improved marital relationships, and so did many husbands. (Gordon 288)

The ideology of sexuality became much more liberated during the decade, both in real life and in the literary world, and “from the mid-1950s novels were increasingly seeing the world through the eyes of the liberated young woman who accepts male advances more confidently because more firmly in control of the consequences” (Harrison 247). The change in the social standing of women, heralded in some ways by the Pill, could be seen in literature, as well. Compared to the earlier male courtship genre, which “tended to portray the powerful heterosexual male as romantically sweeping off his entranced virgin bride into a relatively humdrum domesticity and preoccupation with personal appearance” (Harrison 236), the new liberated woman was indeed a step towards progress. Primrose Larkin is an example of this new kind of woman in the novels, as she is on the Pill and very liberal with her sexuality; her behaviour and especially the way she later gives up the Pill does not support the idea of a liberated woman, however. This will be discussed further in the upcoming chapters.

Not all saw the progress on female sexuality and the attitudes related to it as completely positive:

Many feminists regard the sexual liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as its contemporary vestiges, as serving primarily the interests of men precisely because the movement made more women sexually available to men without affording enough women the economic and political tools to escape being sexually subordinated by them. (LeMoncheck 28-29)

This argument is strongly related to the Pill, as well, since in the eyes of many the invention made contraception the responsibility of a woman. The Pill “made it easier for women to fulfil themselves

sexually, although their sexuality was still defined in male terms” (Wilson 69), and by the late 1970s “a view of the Pill as a method of *controlling* young women has indeed gained ground” (ibid., italics original).

Despite the differing views about the Pill, during the 1960s and 1970s women began to resist the traditional gender roles taught to them, and the Pill aided in the late 1960s sexual revolution: old ideas about relationships were questioned, and people sought to break the rules about premarital sex. (“To Love and Obey”) The columnists of newspaper problem pages, in which they would answer problems and issues the readers would send them, began to be more liberal, and “by the 1960s columnists increasingly acknowledged the sexual agency of women and they supported their efforts to be self-reflective about sexual pleasure” (Bingham 57). Attitudes were radically changing as time went on:

By the end of the 1960s the scene had been set: Premarital sexuality had become a generally accepted reality; contraception and sterilization were increasingly available; . . . age at first marriage continued to rise and divorce had become a viable alternative; and there was a growing mood of dissidence . . . and an increasing value being placed on autonomy, equality, intimacy, self-actualization, openness, and exploration.  
(Macklin 906)

However, change is often slow and seldom happens overnight, or even over a decade. Despite the numerous changes in atmosphere during the 1960s, most people still respected traditional values and believed marriage was for life, for example; in 1969, only four in every 1000 marriages in Britain ended in divorce. (“To Love and Obey”)

As will become evident with the Larkin novels, the ideals of the society and the actions of the people do not always go hand in hand. Newspaper problem pages, as examined by Bingham, reflect this clearly; in the 1940s, the advice given by the columnists was conservative and in keeping with the ideology of the society – virginity and abstinence were virtues. The people, however, did not live according to this ideology, as evidenced by the problems the columnists received; if the people had lived according to the morals and values the society upheld, there would have been no need for counselling in this way. Indeed, there seems to be an endless contrast between how people are



expected to behave – by society, culture, and the people themselves – and how they behave in reality. In the 1950s and the 1960s the advice given in the problem pages began to focus more on individuals and their well-being rather than on defending traditional values, such as marriage. (Bingham 55) This can be seen as the public opinion catching up with the actual public. This is something that the Larkin novels portray: the Larkins themselves are living a life that is ahead of its time, as their attitudes to sex and sexuality are more liberal than the general opinion of the 1950s would be. For example, “columnists still warned against pre-marital and extra-marital affairs, they also became much more likely to encourage married readers, and women in particular, to lose their inhibitions and explore the possibilities of sexual pleasure.” (Bingham 56) The Larkins have very liberal views on pre- and extra-marital relationships, while they also see sexual pleasure as a key element of good life. They are, then, both an example of the transition phase of sexuality, but also ahead of their time in how liberally they see the world.

#### **4. Women and Sexuality**

In this chapter I will look into the portrayal of the female characters in the novels and examine how women and sexuality are dealt with in the series. The focus of the chapter will be on the treatment of the women and their bodies rather than the relationships they have with other characters, which will be further examined in chapter 5. The aim of this chapter is to provide a look into how the female characters are examples of sexual objectification, and in contrast how their looks and sexuality can also be a positive factor in their lives, and a source of power. The first part of the chapter will focus on objectification and its many forms, while also discussing whether a standard of femininity affects the way the way the characters are portrayed. In the second section the focus will be on the ways through which the women gain power through their sexuality and looks, or through the lack of it. The

final part of this chapter will focus on virginity, which is a subject that has much prominence especially during the first two novels.

#### **4.1 The Prettier, the Better: Femininity and Objectification**

Regarding the treatment of the female characters in the Larkin novels, two terms must be taken into account: sexual objectification and sexualisation. In this section I will look into these two concepts, and how they relate to the female characters in the novels. The descriptions for all the women in the Larkin novels are plentiful and detailed, from the quality of their skin to their shapes – or the lack of them. There are two kinds of descriptions about the women: praising or degrading. Very little middle ground can be found on the subject. Women's worth in the novels is in many ways determined by how appealing they are to the men, and emphasized, or traditional, femininity's relation to objectification and attractiveness will also be looked into in this section. Traditional femininity here means the way women are expected to look like and behave:

Broadly, traditional or “emphasized femininity” norms encourage female passivity, compliance with men's sexual advances, an unremitting desire to have a romantic partner, a pressure to be sentimental and emotionally committed and caring, a pressure to attract the gaze of men, and pressure to manufacture romantic feelings and mitigate unhappiness or abuse. (Korobov 52-53)

There is also power that the women gain through their looks (and by defying emphasized femininity) and that matter will be discussed in the next section; here, however, the focus is on the physical side of femininity, sexual objectification, and the relation those two concepts have with each other.

There are many kinds of objectification, which at its core is defined in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (henceforth OALD) as “the act of treating people as if they are objects, without rights and feelings of their own” (“objectification”), and the focus here is mostly on sexual objectification simply because that is what the novels primarily portray. None of the female characters are, for example, treated literally like objects – nobody is seen as a statue or a pillow. Instead, they are all people and are recognised as such; they are, however, made into beings whose looks determine

their likability, success, attractiveness to men, and confidence. Sexualisation is another term closely related to sexual objectification, and the most basic definition of it in the OALD is that it is the process of making somebody, or something, “seem sexually attractive” (“sexualize”). This can mean such things as making children’s clothes have sex appeal when they previously had none, or adding it to inanimate or genderless objects. The word “seem” in the above description is quite telling of the term, as one can make something sexual that is not sexual, or should not be so. I will examine sexualisation further later on, as it does not appear in the Larkin novels as much; here, the line is drawn between sexualisation and sexual objectification, where the former is attached to making those sexual who should not be sexual, like the 14-year-old Primrose, and the latter concerning those characters that can be seen as sexual, but who then are defined by it as characters and have little else to them.

Martha C. Nussbaum identifies seven different “ways to treat a person as a thing” (257), which are:

1. *Instrumentality*: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes.
2. *Denial of autonomy*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
3. *Inertness*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.
4. *Fungibility*: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
5. *Violability*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6. *Ownership*: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
7. *Denial of subjectivity*: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account. (Nussbaum 257, *italics original*)

While Nussbaum herself admits that these definitions need refining (257), they are still a viable way of classifying objectification. Most of the seven types can directly be applied to actual objects, such as statues or books, and when thinking about people the definitions can be applied quite easily. There are signs of all of these types in the Larkin novels (especially in connection with Pop’s behaviour), but they are not always as clearly described as these definitions are. Forms of objectification vary,

and can be stronger or weaker; for example, the above mentioned *ownership* can be very strong in cases of slavery, but not as apparent when thinking about one's spouse. The slave owner feels justified in owning a person, and a spouse can have feelings of owning his or her significant other in one way or another. Therefore the treatment of a certain woman or a character cannot be placed in a strict slot; rather, some characters might be less likened to objects than others, and Nussbaum's seven types of objectification are also a scale. As the vast majority of the objectification occurring in the Larkin novels is of the sexual kind, that is the perspective from which the matter shall be looked at. Nussbaum's definitions will be referenced in larger extent later on in this section in connection with Pop's behaviour.

Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr state that sexual objectification "occurs when a woman's body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire" (3). This becomes quite clear in how the attractive female characters are described; in the beginning of *The Darling Buds of May*, Mr Charlton is in awe of "the new celestial body, in *its* yellow shirt" (8-9, italics added), and a bit later "a new astral body, now in a lime green dress" (19). This "body" refers to Mariette, who is also described as a "figure" (19) Mr Charlton cannot believe in. While Mariette's body and beauty are constantly described in detail, she has to make way for her sister Primrose towards the end of the Larkin novels. Primrose is described as even more sexy and attractive, and is constantly wearing extremely revealing clothes: "Now the sight of her in the tiniest of mini-skirts, blouse unbuttoned, the upper rims of her breasts white as washed seashells against the sun-brown of her neck and legs and face, was too much" (LWYF 46). She is mostly seen through the eyes of Mr Candy, the priest Primrose tries seducing at the age of 14. It is not certain how old Primrose is in the above quote, but at least two to four years have passed since the reader last saw her doing the aforementioned seducing. Regardless, Mr Candy finds himself tortured by her looks, and her physical attributes and clothing are always described whenever she appears in a scene. Mr Candy does not merely find her beautiful, but through his eyes the reader sees

mostly Primrose's shapes and curves, and the current state of her less-than-covering clothes. Mariette is mostly described in terms of sexiness hiding under her clothes, and her being just naturally seductive, whereas Primrose's sexiness is plainly there for anyone to see. She does not hide her body sensually, she likes to reveal as much of it as she can, and it is all described to the reader.

Primrose is an example of sexualisation in *Oh! To Be in England* when she is only 14, and described much the same as when she is older. She is "as fully developed as a woman of twenty and every bit as well aware of it too" (OTE 28). She is still seen through the eyes of Mr Candy, who is tempted by her and horrified of the fact at the same time, and descriptions of the 14-year-old child are sometimes very provocative:

She was wearing a shortish mauve dressing gown, quite open at the neck, and he could have sworn that she was wearing little, if anything, underneath it. The soft, sallow skin of her neck curved away into a taut bust uplifted and enlarged by the particular way she folded her arms underneath it. She ran her tongue over her lips, moistening them slightly, and fixed him with dark, still eyes. (OTE 85)

It would be easy to name Mr Candy the one who is perverted and lusting after a child, but Primrose's behaviour is deliberately seductive, and by the time the above scene occurs, she has already forcibly kissed him. He is portrayed in a very positive light; he is a good-natured, nervous man, and all in all very acceptable – certainly not someone who would ogle at underage girls. The whole thing is apparently supposed to be taken as humorous, and Baldwin calls Primrose's behaviour "good-natured dalliance" and the "scenes of attempted seduction" are "hilarious" (211). The truth remains, however, that her "attempted seduction" is not merely attempted; it is successful. She has Mr Candy under her spell throughout *Oh! To Be in England* and the whole of *A Little of What You Fancy*. The humour value seems to consist of her looking older than she is and Mr Candy's awkward reactions to this, but she is still a child who is described as so sexy that she can throw a clergyman off balance. Primrose's age is disturbingly easily overlooked by everyone else but Mr Candy, who is very bewildered by her charm on him and thinks that it is "illegal . . . full of ghastly possibilities . . . like being tempted with a ripe fruit" (OTE 37). Yet he is unable to resist Primrose's advances.

Ma is an interesting subject for this section due to her being the target of both positive and negative commentary. She does not fit the beauty ideals of either the 1950s or the 1960s; the 1950s society adored a tiny waist with a shapely bosom and hips. It was, after all, the time when Marilyn Monroe and British Diana Dors established their roles as universal sex symbols. Already in the 1940s de Beauvoir summarizes the beauty ideals which would, in one way or another, dominate the western culture for decades to come:

The feminine body is asked to be flesh, but with discretion; it is to be slender and not loaded with fat; muscular, supple, strong, it is bound to suggest transcendence; it must not be pale like a too shaded hothouse plant, but preferably tanned like a workman's torso from being bared to the open sun. (277)

This description is almost exactly the kind of beauty ideal that the novels put forth, and which shall be discussed later on. In some ways Ma is quite the opposite of these ideals: she is a large woman, and the novel makes this very clear at several points. Her ever increasing size is often referred to, and the narrator's comments on her appearance are along the lines of "circus elephant" (DBM 43). Despite the derogatory nature of the commentary on Ma, she is still depicted as a sexual being, and an object of desire:

Ma, on the other hand, slept in nylon nightgowns, one of them an unusual pale petunia-pink that Pop liked more than all the rest because it was light, delicate, and above all completely transparent. It was wonderful for seeing through. Under it Ma's body appeared like a global map, an expanse of huge explorable mountains, shadowy valleys, and rosy pinnacles. (DBM 29)

In the quote above it is worth noting how Ma's body is likened to a map, to geographical phenomena. She is "explorable"; and as the scene is told through the eyes of Pop, it is he who can do the exploring. Here, Ma is an uncharted land that needs to be explored, much like for the Europeans "new" lands of Africa and America needed to be explored in the expeditions of old. This is often seen as a man's world, exploring the world and so "conquering" it, as it was more often than not men who embarked on these ambitious journeys, and nature is often considered feminine. The woman, then, is here portrayed as the passive land which the man must explore, discover, and own. The description is, of

course, closely tied to Ma and her size, as that is often a source of humour in the novels; Ma, then, is here both a passive object for a man to explore, and the butt of a physical joke.

The descriptions of the women are not limited to geography. When Sister Trevelyan, an attractive nurse assigned to Pop in *A Little of What You Fancy*, is introduced, she is likened to an animal: “Bronzed, magnificent in carriage, smooth as a deer in movement, she had altogether the look of some prize and lovely animal entered in a show” (75). Ma, impressed by her, thinks she has “a bit of a pedigree” (LWYF 75). Sister Trevelyan seems to be more of a show animal to be looked at and valued for her physical attributes than a proper human being. According to Heflick and Goldenberg, this is an example of dehumanization, as a woman is given animalistic features. (225-226) This is telling of a certain attitude prevalent in the series – the women are, mostly, there to be looked at and admired, if there is something to admire. Sister Trevelyan’s most prominent character trait is that she is extremely attractive and easy-going. In fact, the rest of the female characters who are described as beautiful are much like her – confident and glad to be admired. “The ‘true woman’ is required to make herself object” (Beauvoir 276) is a statement that, when examining the novels, seems to have truth in it. Women who are not putting themselves and their looks forward are considered lesser.

The woman’s worth in the novels is measured by her attractiveness; or rather, her worth as a *woman* is measured in how beautiful or sexual she is. Hallenbeck notes that “desirability in the woman is often equated with sex appeal, especially at the younger ages”; desirability here means beauty and attractiveness, like women who are “photographers’ models or movie starlets.” (Hallenbeck 201) Women who are not described as beautiful or sexual – like Edith – seem lacking in some ways. They busy themselves with hobbies and generally have the air of trying to do as much as they possibly can. Edith is keen on organizing things, while Angela’s pious sister Iris pursues the virtues of religion relentlessly. This behaviour is contrasted with that of the liberally sexual women: they do not fuss about things, they do not have “indoor hobbies”, and they move through life with ease and comfort. They are rarely seen doing anything for the sake of simply doing it, and are relaxed with their life and

habits. Angela seems to exist merely to have a good time and look stunning; Mariette and Primrose do much the same, but occasionally help Ma with minor chores. Even Sister Trevelyan, who actually has a job to do, does very little of it in the end. They are neither stressed nor anxious, like Edith is, and make an effort to look as beautiful as they can.

This is where a woman's looks and her worth as a woman come up. To look like a woman, one must follow certain rules the society has set upon women. As de Beauvoir's summary of the female beauty ideal above suggests, women are to look womanly. When the Larkins arrive in France, they see French girls for the first time, and are thoroughly unimpressed by them – and in contrast, Mariette is showing an example of physical femininity:

The younger ones, who were nearly all tallow-coloured, bruise-eyed and flat-chested, wore jeans. It was hard to tell any of them from boys and in consequence Pop felt more than usually proud of Mariette, who looked so fleshily, elegantly, and provocatively girl. (BFA 31)

This sets a standard for what women are supposed to look like. She is “provocatively” feminine, which implies that she is seeking out male gaze, as mentioned earlier in the quote from Korobov. Nothing good is ever said about the French girls, whereas Mariette's beauty is constantly emphasized. The French ladies are the opposite of her:

And their figures were nothing, Ma thought, absolutely nothing. ‘Compared with our Mariette's’, Ma reckoned, ‘you'd think they were boys with a few pimples here and there. . . . some of 'em don't even shave where they ought to.’ (BFA 58)

The French men adore Mariette and swarm around her on the beach, whereas the Larkins' son, Montgomery, is said to be bored because of the “boyish female skinnies” (BFA 64). As there is no positive word said about the French women, it is easy to gather that being womanly in the way Mariette is womanly is the right way to go. She is the one setting the standard for what looking feminine should be, and those deviating from this are lesser than her, and lesser as women. Edith is much like the French women: unattractive, boyish, not putting herself and her sexuality forward in the way Mariette and later Primrose are.



A contrast to a “properly” feminine woman is given in *A Little of What You Fancy* in the form of Nurse Soaper. She is the first nurse assigned to Pop, and described as looking like “a heavyweight boxer who had forgotten to shave for a day or two”, having a nose “broad and slightly flattened”, with a hair “naturally grey in colour but had recently been dyed an unpleasant shade of yellow, so that it looked rather like the coat of a moulting vixen.” (LWYF 57) She is strict at her job and prevents Pop from using alcohol, fatty foods, and generally forbids him from enjoying himself like he used to – as the doctor ordered. She is the “villain” in the situation, crude in behaviour, and having no nonsense from Pop or anyone else. Nothing good is ever said about her, and nobody seems to like her. She is eventually replaced with Sister Trevelyan, who is more lenient, sexy, and a friend of Angela’s, and said to have “a slight propensity towards nocturnal wanderlust” (LWYF 70). What is noteworthy here is that Nurse Soaper, who is unfeminine, crass, and unpleasant – and whose sourness Ma thinks is because she has “never had *the pleasure*” (LWYF 63, italics added) – is replaced with someone who is attractive, seductive, and all in all pleasant. There is something wrong with Nurse Soaper, despite her doing her job quite effectively: she is not attractive, sexual, or mild-mannered. While it is understandable that Pop and the others do not like her due to her rather crude personality, it must be noted that the unfeminine, not in the least sexy woman, is also described as unpleasant in every other way. Mariette, Angela, Primrose, and Sister Trevelyan are all beautiful and therefore pleasant, while Nurse Soaper is extremely unpleasant, and also not beautiful. Edith is not beautiful either, but while her personality is not as bad as Nurse Soaper’s, she is still not described as carefree and relaxed as the beautiful, sexual women. The trend seems to be that all beautiful women are also beautiful on the inside, while the unattractive ones also have a personality flaw or two; this seems to fit on a scale where pleasantness is directly correlated to attractiveness and sexuality. On the “good” end there are the sexually liberated Larkin daughters and Angela, among a few others, and the “bad” end has the masculine, not the least bit sexy Nurse Soaper, with Edith somewhere in between. The

more of an object and the more of an example of emphasized femininity the woman is (beautiful, always sexually available) the better she is as a person in the universe of the Larkin novels.

So far the objectification and sexualisation of women has been looked at from the point of view of femininity and the descriptions of the women – their looks, personalities, and behaviour. However, male actions in relation to objectification are something that often come up with Pop, the main protagonist of the Larkin novels, who is fond of women as previously mentioned. He liberally touches and caresses Ma, which she finds acceptable and desirable; however, he also does this with every female friend he has. Pinching and touching women is acceptable to him, and in most cases to the women he interacts with, like Edith. To Pop, his caresses are casual and a part of his relationship with the women in his life, and he does not see wrong in this. It is, however, something that robs the women of something, making them more like sexual objects: it is completely acceptable, in the novels, for Pop to touch any woman he likes. Their bodies are then *his*; he has the right to touch them because that is what he wants, regardless of how the women feel about it. His behaviour comes very close to *ownership* in Nussbaum's terms in *Oh! To Be in England*:

Pop and Mr Candy, in shirt sleeves, were in the kitchen with Angela Snow, Primrose and Jasmine Brown, all washing up, Pop now and then pausing to pay caressive attention to Angela and Jasmine and occasionally warmly urging Mr Candy to follow suit. Mr Candy, however, was firm in refusal. (OTE 116)

In the quote above Pop is not only casually caressing the two women but also inadvertently offering his 14-year-old daughter to Mr Candy, which on its part explains his refusal and awkwardness in the situation. Pop himself is familiar with Angela and Jasmine and therefore liberally touches them, but in urging Mr Candy to do the same he implies that the women are *his* to offer, that they have no say in the matter and are merely there for the pleasure of the men. In addition to the implied *ownership* there is also an implication of *denial of autonomy* here, as Pop never even expects the women to say what they want or if they would like Mr Candy to touch them as well; they are *inert*, without any kind of will in the situation. They are also providing an example of emphasized femininity by being available to the men and accepting their advances without any resistance.

One can argue that Pop's behaviour does not objectify the women as much because in most cases his caresses are entirely consensual, he knows the women and interacts with them as *persons*, and is aware that the women approve of it. Indeed, Nussbaum reminds that with objectification, "context is everything" (271), as will become evident with Mrs Jerebohm and Pop (as the same behaviour can have two very different meanings and outcomes). However, Pop's touches being consensual do not mean that they do not objectify, it only makes it either acceptable or unacceptable to the object of his caresses. He knows he can touch women like Edith and Angela, and of course Ma, but he does this with complete authority. Whether they are his friends or not is not overly significant when he believes it his right to behave in this manner – and that his actions do not mean anything. His behaviour shows a form of *fungibility*, one of Nussbaum's seven types of objectification: whether Pop caresses Ma, Edith, Angela, or Jasmine, it makes no difference to him in that situation. It is still a woman he is touching, and very little consideration is given to who the woman actually is. It is not always women he is close friends with that he sees appropriate to touch in a sexual manner, either. In *When the Green Woods Laugh* Pop meets Mrs Jerebohm, whom he does not find particularly captivating but pleasing to the eye nonetheless. She seems like a nice woman, and Pop takes her to a meadow and wonders if he could caress her, too:

It was pretty nearly perfect by the lakeside on such a day. It was his idea of heaven. The only thing that could perhaps have made it more perfect still, he thought, was the chance of a having a short, gentle squeeze with Pinkie.

He wondered how she'd take it? Just the same as Edith Pilchester did? he wondered, and then suddenly found he couldn't be sure. They were *très snob*, the Jerebohms. She might go sour. (GWL 81, italics original)

Here, Pop is uncertain of how his advances would be met, and his uncertainty is based on the fact that the Jerebohms are fancy city people, and because of this she might not like his antics the way Edith does, for example. "Going sour" carries the implication of something good being met with something negative – his "gentle squeeze" could in his mind only be a positive thing, and sourness would mean that the woman does not understand the positive nature of his actions. "Sour" is a term Pop uses for

a woman he does not like, Corinne Perigo, who is in the same novel found quite spiteful and is described as rather unpleasant and who will be discussed in chapter 6.

Pop sees the situation as good for both him and Pinkie Jerebohm: “Couldn’t do no harm. It wasn’t every girl, after all, who got the chance of being stroked in the middle of a primrose wood on a hot April afternoon.” (GWL 81) He feels that being caressed by him in that location could only be a privilege to Mrs Jerebohm, who has not shown any strong interest in Pop and who is happily married. He does not see harm in touching this woman’s body without her consent, just to satisfy his own idea of a perfect moment and a perfect day. By touching her, he would separate her persona from her body, and ignore the fact that the two are intertwined; as sexuality and touching have a very liberal standing in the Larkin sphere, it is impossible for Pop to understand why this might not be what every woman wants. Here he demonstrates *denial of autonomy* in thinking that he knows better; he thinks he knows what would be good for her, and thus he is taking away whatever will she might have.

The fact that Pop knows things might not turn out for the best if he gives her a squeeze does not deter him from doing it. This means that he knows she might not like it, but does it anyway, giving no value to her privacy or integrity. In this case, *denial of subjectivity* and *violability* are the two types of objectification strongly present. The former refers to how Pop simply ignores how Mrs Jerebohm might feel about being touched by him; he is preoccupied with the idea of squeezing her: “His chances were disappearing as rapidly and surely as the boat was drifting through shoals of unfurling water-lily pads into the bank” (GWL 85). It is something he *must* do, for whatever reason, and when he then ends up doing it, Mrs Jerebohm reacts with alarm and screams. Pop is surprised by this and even more perplexed when she accuses him of attempted violation. (GWL 86) *Violability* is an obvious case here. Although in Nussbaum’s definitions introduced earlier, *violability* was described as quite literally breaking an object, it is fully applicable to this situation: Pop does not respect Mrs Jerebohm’s boundary-integrity, and in a sense is “breaking into” her privacy. In the end, Mrs Jerebohm, with encouragement from Corinne Perigo, takes Pop to court.

The most telling part of the sexual objectification (and more precisely *fungibility*) of women in this matter is Pop's need to squeeze Mrs Jerebohm, and the fact that he thinks it would be a privilege to her. Because Mrs Jerebohm does not like Pop's advances, she offers a contrast to Edith and the others, who all love Pop. The key here is not as much *who* it is alright to pinch, but the fact that Pop's behaviour towards Mrs Jerebohm is exactly the same as his behaviour towards those women who do not mind his advances or who like them. The same attention that Edith lives for is what makes Mrs Jerebohm hurt and distraught – in both cases, Pop treats the women and their bodies the same, and with similar “right”, essentially seeing the women as only objects who can be touched whenever he feels like doing so.

There is also an example of *instrumentality* in *Oh! To Be in England* when Pop devises a plan to teach an unpleasant male character a lesson. The key part to make this plan work is to have an attractive female character lure him in. The woman in question, Jasmine Brown, though doing it willingly, is here a tool for Pop's purposes. Pop is the one putting the plan together, and he uses Jasmine to make it work; she is a character who only appears in this one novel and only for this purpose. Jasmine, though being a character with very little else to her than being a part of Pop's plot, will be further discussed (from a different perspective) in section 4.2.

Pop is throughout the Larkin novels the main male character, and there is really no other man who would behave the same as he when it comes to women. However, in *A Little of What You Fancy* the reader is introduced to Angela Snow's father Sir John, who is just as flirtatious as Pop, if not more. He too sees it his liberty to pinch women he finds attractive. He joins the Larkins for dinner, and throughout the event he caresses Sister Trevelyan under the table, despite her protests:

‘If you do that again,’ Sister Trevelyan whispered, ‘I shall scream.’  
 ‘Scream.’  
 Sister Trevelyan thought it prudent not to scream. (LWYF 160)

Sir John, like Pop, seems to think he is allowed to touch women any way he wants, and also seems to be under the illusion that the women will, eventually, enjoy this attention their bodies are given.

*Denial of autonomy* comes up here again, as Sir John refuses to acknowledge Sister Trevelyan's protests and seems to be under the impression that she will like his behaviour in the end; he knows best, and she should understand that. The fact that this comes true in Sister Trevelyan's case will be looked further into in chapter 6. Regardless, his treatment of her in this case is entirely based on her physical attractiveness, because it is the first time he has ever met her. Therefore what he sees in her is a sexual object that he would like to touch, and so he does.

#### **4.2 Control, Power, and Resource: Female Sexuality**

Most of the women who are described in attractive terms in the series, with the possible exception of Ma, use their body in one way or another to gain something they want. This gain can be sexual, but it is not always so. It also works both ways – sometimes the control over the women's bodies is in the hands of men. In this section I examine how the women in the novels use their sexual power, and how men limit it. I will also look into those female characters who are described as non-sexual or undesirable, and examine how they use power – it is often a very different kind of power, and more direct. According to LeMoncheck, “feminists have often argued that women's freedom from their sexual subordination by men is directly proportional to the amount of control women have over our [sic] bodies” (54). This point of view can be seen in the Larkin novels, as the most confident and sexual female characters – the ones who are most in control of their bodies and sexuality – are also the ones who are capable of dominating men with their sexuality; a matter that will be discussed in this section.

The kind of power the women demonstrate in the novels can also be seen in terms of *capital*, or *resource*. Hallenbeck mentions that with women, attractiveness can be a resource they can use. (201) This is especially true when Mariette begins seducing Mr Charlton in *The Darling Buds of May*. The arrival of Mr Charlton occurs very soon after the conversation where Mariette's pregnancy is revealed, and Mariette's seduction of him begins almost at once. During the most obvious attempts,

the family and Mr Charlton are eating dinner while the television is on. The programme at the time is about prostitution. The scene parallels prostitution to what Mariette is doing; and although her motive is very likely to obtain a husband, she is also distracting Mr Charlton from his job, which is to sort out the Larkins' tax situation. Mariette is giving something sexual to Mr Charlton to free her family of the uncomfortable situation – it is made clear that the Larkins do not pay taxes and have no intention of doing so.

It may seem strange for the novel to make such a controversial parallel. However, prostitution was an issue in the 1950s. In 1956, the prostitution law in Britain was changed for the first time since 1912, creating the Sexual Offences Act; it is still the basis of modern laws directed towards third-party organized prostitution (Laite). In 1957, very close to the publishing of *The Darling Buds of May*, the *Wolfenden Report* was published; it stated that “it was not the state’s job to police private morality” and argued that “prostitution could not be condemned by the law as immoral in and of itself” (Laite). What this demonstrates is that prostitution was a hot topic during the writing process of *The Darling Buds of May*, and that it is reflected in the novel. During the scene where Mariette is heavily seducing Mr Charlton, a woman on the television talk show on prostitution says, “The women are, on the whole, less to be blamed than pitied. It is largely the fault of man” (DBM 27). In this light, it is very difficult to see Mr Charlton as the one at fault, when it is Mariette using her sexuality to dominate him in order to get what she wants. Therefore the situation can be seen as commentary on the prostitution issue – the Larkins, who the reader is to sympathise with, calmly accept what Mariette is doing. The parallel makes another claim: the women are not always the victims. Prostitution is often thought to be something that women are forced into by men, becoming victims of a myriad of crimes. This is, of course, a fact in many cases; but often the discussion about prostitution neglects to mention those women who participate voluntarily, or even like it, and who find it a way to take control of their own life:

As women who advocate financial independence, sexual self-determination, and protection against sexual abuse of all women, they consider themselves feminists as

well as sex workers who acknowledge the intimidation and abuse of sex workers worldwide but who reject feminists' and moral conservatives' identification of all sex workers as victims. From this perspective, if prostitution gives a woman the financial independence to choose what to do with her life, feminists who value women's sexual agency and self-definition must not condemn women for pursuing sex work. (LeMoncheck 113)

Mariette demonstrates this kind of a woman – someone who has no problem about sex or using it to her own personal gain, without becoming a victim. She is fully aware that it is she who is in control of her body, and she is able to use it in a way that is beneficial to her. The power she, and her body, has on Mr Charlton – and men in general – is something the women throughout the Larkin novels freely use to their advantage. It is a resource she is able to use effectively and trade for things she wants. Berger and Wenger bring out an interesting aspect of sexuality:

If the sole value of females and/or their function in society is an exclusively sexual one . . . , then women's control over their own sexual behaviour provides the only possible control over their own destinies, and their only source of power. . . . Women can "trade off" their sexual "favors," *i.e.*, sexual power, for valued goods and services in other stratificational realms . . . (Berger & Wenger 666, italics original)

While Berger and Wenger's focus is on virginity, their thoughts on sexuality being a product to trade with are very intriguing. This is the kind of power especially Mariette uses in *The Darling Buds of May* – and it may well be that it is virginity she is trading with, as Mr Charlton has no way of knowing Mariette's sexual history.

Sex-appeal is also used as a way of "teaching a lesson" to an unlikeable character. In *Oh! To Be in England* the reader is introduced to Captain Broadbent, a coarse man with a timid wife who seems to be afraid of him. He is a generally unpleasant man, a "self-styled ladykiller of all time" (OTE 25), who does not like the countryside, or the women there, and is often insulting in many ways:

'Even the one and only pub's a bloody mausoleum. At nine o'clock last night there was one cock-eyed yokel in there with the twitch and two fat old trouts who never said a word. What do you do with all the women round here? Lock the poor bitches up in purdah?' (OTE 20)



Pop immediately dislikes him and decides he needs a lesson. For this, he calls his friend Angela to ask about Jasmine Brown, a “very dark, smouldering, big-built girl who had matured at twenty into the full-blown mould of a woman ten years older” (OTE 21). She is sexually uninhibited, according to Angela, and ready to take part in whatever scheme there is at hand. The Larkins invite Captain Broadbent to their pool party, where he is exposed to the Larkins’ beautiful daughters, along with Angela and Jasmine. Jasmine then proceeds to successfully seduce the Captain only to lead him into a boat, row in the middle of a river, and gleefully make them both fall into the water, her in her bikini, him in his fancy suit.

While this ploy is initiated by Pop, it is not something Angela and Jasmine do without prior knowledge of the Captain; Angela has met him before and her dislike towards him is even deeper than Pop’s. Jasmine is the one who makes the plan reality; she knows how to play men to her own advantage. At no point is she described as anything but a strong, dangerous being who the Captain, “though half-terrified” (OTE 50), cannot resist. The Captain is a whole different person with Jasmine; with his fearful wife and the country people, like Pop, whom he despises, he is strong and arrogant. However, Jasmine reduces him to a nervous, even shy, man: “Her large black eyes, liquid and hypnotic, held him relentlessly *imprisoned* for fully half a minute until in desperation he suddenly released himself and lowered his own eyes . . . ” (OTE 47, italics added) He is so in her power that he does not see the plot at work, and she is constantly calculating her moves:

At the same moment Jasmine Brown seized him in an embrace as fierce and all-enfolding as that of a lioness *overcoming its prey*. . . . Her lips smothered his own with a passion *so well simulated* that he actually found himself struggling against it . . . ” (OTE 50, italics added)

Jasmine is ready to use her physical abilities in order to get what she wants, and is capable of faking emotions when the situation requires it.

By the end of *A Little of What You Fancy*, Primrose stops taking birth control pills and gets pregnant because “Mr Candy does not approve of the Pill” (LWYF 186). With this ending for Primrose and Mr Candy, two things are worth noting: first, that their assumed and implied marriage

is founded mostly on sex and poetry, and second, that she stops taking the Pill because he does not want her to take it, despite both of them knowing very well that their relationship consists mostly of sex and it is only a matter of time before she finds herself pregnant. Thus Primrose relinquishes her control over her own body to a man who should not have any say in the matter – they are not married, and in no way is it ever implied that Primrose wants a child; after all, why take the Pill if she did. As mentioned in the earlier quote from LeMoncheck, a woman's sexual power is related to the control over her own body; this includes her right to “make sexual and reproductive decisions for herself without undue interference from others” (LeMoncheck 54). This power, therefore, is what Primrose has now lost.

The matter of birth control becomes prominent in *A Little of What You Fancy*, and the attitudes towards it vary. Primrose clearly accepts it fully, and so does Ma, but not so much Pop:

When Ma pointed out blandly that consumption of the Pill allowed Nature to take its course even more freely and enjoyably than before Pop was forced to admit that this was so.  
... he wasn't all that sure he approved of this Pill lark. There was something a bit immoral about it, sort of. (LWYF 45)

It becomes apparent that while the women approve of the then-new method of birth control – the Pill was made widely available in Britain in 1961 for married women, and for all women in 1967 (the NHS) – the men in the novel seem to have a problem with it. Hallenbeck brings up a related question: “Does a man assert his male dominance, as folklore would have it, by keeping his wife more or less continuously pregnant? Is the modern-day wife reversing this trend by limiting the number of children she is willing to have?” (201) With this, Hallenbeck evokes an intriguing idea: having multiple children is a way of controlling the woman, while limiting the number is a way for women to try to break that control over them. The “modern-day wife” would in this case refer to a woman of the 1960s, as it is when Hallenbeck's article was published. If seen from this perspective, Pop's doubts about the Pill in the above quote would then be explained through his most likely subconscious fear of losing control or power over Ma, who is often pregnant. Pop even expresses concern when he

thinks Ma is implying she is done with having children. With Mr Candy, the issue of the Pill is most likely a religious one, but it does not change the fact that he is still telling Primrose what to do with her own body.

Not all power the women in the series demonstrate is sexual. Edith Pilchester, whose descriptions are often derogatory when it comes to her looks and behaviour, is not seen as a particularly strong woman. She is dependent on the attention Pop gives her, is often nervous, and has no inkling of the kind of confidence most other women in the novels have. However, when two sinister youths try to attack Pop with a razor, something in Edith snaps and she begins attacking the hooligans by hurling coconuts at them (OTE 64), ultimately driving them away. She saves the day while the men in the situation mostly watch on. She also has a past in the British army:

‘Oh! no. Edith was in the Navy at that time.’

At this Pop was even more stunned than the Brigadier, who gulped afresh at his whisky and said ‘Good God. Never? Edith in the Navy?’

‘She was a Wren,’ Miss Effie said. ‘Oh! you mustn’t underestimate Edith. She has a medal somewhere.’

Good Gawd, Pop thought. Where? No wonder we won. (LWYF 129)

Like with Edith, other seemingly dainty and weak women have more to them than meets the eye. The elderly twin sisters Effie and Edna, “Frail, genteel and seemingly near-sighted” (LWYF 120) live a simple life with each other, quiet and unassuming. However, the appearance is deceiving:

The impression that a puff of wind might have blown the two little ladies away was entirely illusory. They were both resolute and tough. Daughters of a retired Indian Civil Servant they were in reality two little pillars of iron upholding with dignity, pride and certain patriotic passion the fact that there would always be an England and if ever by some disastrous consequence there wasn’t it wouldn’t be their fault and it would be over their dead little bodies anyway. (LWYF 120)

It is noteworthy here that Edith, Effie, and Edna’s power is not sexual because that is not an option for them. They are never described as particularly attractive, and therefore cannot use their sexuality the way Mariette and the other attractive women are using it. Because Edith and the others lack this aspect of their femininity, they have other means of “compensating” for it; similarly, the women who are described as being sexually attractive do not demonstrate the kind of physical or mental power

the unattractive women do. This is very probably related to Edith's age, since "aging single women become sexually less desirable in a culture that defines a woman's sexual attractiveness in terms of her youth and beauty" (LeMoncheck 28). Therefore Edith never has a chance to use her sexuality as a tool of power, because even if she did, she is no longer attractive in the eyes of men. The resources Edith, Effie, and Edna possess are not sexual, but rather intellectual or related to loyalty or dignity.

While Edith, Edna, and Effie are all described as generally nice women and are friends of the Larkins', they receive nowhere near as much praise as the attractive women do, like Angela Snow. The fact remains that the beautiful, young women are also nice, but they are far more confident and open than the older, unattractive women. Their power is mostly sexual, however, and their interests are rarely described. Mariette likes riding, and Primrose enjoys poetry (and is described as fairly intelligent, at least by Larkin standards), whereas Edith is skilled in many crafts and chores, is interested in history, and of course, has a background in the British Navy. Although rarely portrayed as such, Edith does demonstrate intellectual capacity beyond the sexual women. Her resource is not in her looks, but in her mind. Despite this, she is more often than not the target of a joke, and completely controllable by Pop. Here a question of whether a woman can have power when she is under somebody's control, arises. Edith's intellectual power is almost nullified by her dependence on Pop, and it is hard to see her as a powerful character in any way, when one sees her reduced to a shy girl on so many occasions.

It is not that Edith should use her sexuality to control others to have power; it is that she seems to have very little control over *herself* when it comes to her interactions with Pop. She likes him and wants to be with him, but she can also be persuaded to do things she does not want to do just to make Pop happy – or just to please him; one instance is when she unwillingly participates in a donkey race in *The Darling Buds of May*. LeMoncheck suggests that "sexual liberation is women's liberation when women can define its terms and conditions" (54). While Edith experiences sexual thrill with Pop, she is constantly the one being on the receiving end, rather than having any initiative herself;

her sexuality is completely dependent on Pop. Socially she is a spinster, and sexually she is dependent on someone other than herself; “The precious nature of such rare displays of distant affection from Mr Larkin couldn’t be slightly dismissed, still less forgotten” (LWYF 29), is what she thinks of the attention she gets from Pop.

The physical side of femininity was discussed in the previous section, but especially with Mariette and Primrose the concept of emphasized femininity in behaviour is related to the control they take over their bodies. Both are sexually very active, and both have started their sexual life early; Mariette thought she was pregnant when she was 17, and Primrose had also had several false alarms by *A Little of What You Fancy*. With Primrose especially, her attempts to seduce Mr Candy at the age of 14 can be seen as her way of defying emphasized femininity “by breaking with the requirement of girlhood purity” (Leahy 52) and patriarchal power by wanting to be with an adult man:

Such relationships may be conceived of as a threat to the structure of male authority over female sexuality. The adolescent girl who takes it upon herself to initiate a relationship with an adult challenges the father’s right to control her sexuality. The adult power of her lover is seen as a challenge to the proper authority of her father and his control over her sexual contacts. (Leahy 53)

While the Larkin family is very open and allowing when it comes to raising children, Pop is still the head of the household. He is the one the children listen to in the end: “‘Quiet!’ Pop thundered for the second time in ten minutes and there was instant silence at the table, so that Ma remarked with pride, as she so often did, that Pop had them at a word.” (BFA 97) He seems to be especially close to Primrose, as in *A Breath of French Air* she has a discussion with him about love and whether she could stay in France with a boy; in *Oh! To Be in England* she confesses to him that she thinks she is in love with Mr Candy. Pop asks her if Mr Candy is not a bit too old for her, but Primrose merely asks him how old he was when he fell in love with Ma. (OTE 98) The answer to that, fourteen, becomes irrelevant considering that Ma and Pop are roughly the same age, while the age difference between Primrose and Mr Candy is about eleven years and she is fourteen herself. However, Pop leaves the matter at that, and they discuss it no more. Although subtle, Primrose does defy her father

here: she has already made up her mind, and even though Pop has doubts about the age difference, she will not back down. She does not seek for acceptance and engages in sexual relationships without having concerns about what her parents think about it.

The extremely liberal sexual behaviour of many of the women in the series can be seen as a way of defying the kind of emphasized femininity which was discussed in the previous section. While they are traditionally feminine in looks, they are not always so in behaviour. Often in the Larkin novels it is the women initiating or suggesting sexual activities, as Mariette does with Mr Charlton, Primrose with Mr Candy, and Angela often with Pop. In this respect, they are definitely not passive as traditionally feminine women would be, but not always compliant to men's advances, either, as Sister Trevelyan with Sir John and Mrs Jerebohm with Pop. The reverse is also true, however, and all the female characters often have two sides to them – one that defies emphasized femininity, and one that embraces it.

#### **4.3 Virginity: An Unnatural State**

Virginity has been an issue of great importance throughout the centuries, and still is today. Its assumed value can be seen everywhere in history, from virgin sacrifices to gods, through only virgins being suited to marry, to modern ideals of virginity. It is also one of the many aspects to appear in feminist studies, and already de Beauvoir notes that the virgin represents “the most consummate form of the feminine mystery; she is therefore its most disturbing and at the same time its most fascinating aspect” (160). This *disturbing – fascinating* division is something that comes up in the Larkin novels in the way the characters deal with the matter of virginity, or its loss in connection to a character's age.

In her study, Laura M. Carpenter has identified three aspects of virginity: “a gift, a stigma, and a step in the process of growing up” (17). These aspects for virginity, despite being from a new study, are also clearly visible in the Larkin novels and the characters' attitudes towards virginity and virgins,

although in some cases their meaning is somewhat different. I will look into all three aspects in connection to the novels, and examine how they manifest within the stories.

The greatest source of controversy when it comes to Mariette in *The Darling Buds of May* is that she is allegedly pregnant, underage, and what is more, unmarried. It is notable, however, that nobody in the novel thinks any less of her because of this and her pregnancy is not a problem. Pop, when told of the matter, says, “Well, that don’t matter. Perfick. Jolly good.” (DBM 3) Virginity is a recurring theme in the novel, and indeed in the consequent novels, but it is never something the characters themselves seem to value much. Mariette is not a virgin, and it is very unlikely that her rival Pauline – a character who appears once in the series and attempts to seduce Mr Charlton – is, either. Yet it is something that the characters acknowledge is important in the society they live in. Mariette and Pauline have a violent argument over Mr Charlton, and a seething Mariette tries to explain Pauline’s nature to him: “‘She’s nothing but a –’ Mariette choked at some impossible word and then decided Mr Charlton wouldn’t understand it. ‘No, I won’t say it. It’s too good. I’ll bottle it in. *She’s no virgin though!*’ she shouted, ‘*everybody knows that!*’” (DBM 81, italics added) Mariette is aware that virginity is something that the society values, and therefore tries to insult Pauline by telling everyone that she is not a virgin. Considering Mariette’s own situation, the words cannot be taken as her personal view of the matter and are rather meant to shock the bystanders. It seems that virginity is something she knows is valuable as an ideal – a *gift* she should hold on to until she decides to give it to someone. In this light, virginity as a thought is upheld by the society. Therefore there is value in virginity that the characters recognize which has basis in history:

The belief that women’s virginity is a gift, which informs the classic double standard for sexuality, can probably be traced back to women’s historic status as property. . . The young bride was expected to be a virgin on her wedding night, though her groom was not. (Carpenter 61)

This is why Mariette sees it appropriate to insult Pauline the way she does despite her own situation; the value of virginity is so deeply engraved in her culture, spanning over centuries, that even though Mariette herself might not see the value in it, she has a vague idea of it being valuable, therefore

making it desirable to *some*. Something that is culturally so highly regarded therefore *must* be valuable, even if the people at the time are losing much of this value related to it.

Berger and Wenger note already in 1973 that “it is . . . expected, however, that the ideology [of virginity] will show a progressive decline in support over time and that this will correlate with women’s economic rise.” (667) This supports a reading that with Mariette’s behaviour, the first novel depicts a gap forming between generations; on one hand, Mariette and her peers clearly value virginity because the society does so, but on the other hand they themselves do not seem to care so much about it. With this idea, seeing virginity as a stigma becomes relevant. However, while being a virgin today can be a stigma to a young person, the opposite was true in the 1950s and the following decade. In Mariette’s time, not being a virgin was a matter of shame, but today being a virgin is something not everyone is happy about. However, whether virginity is seen as a positive or a negative quality in a woman seems to be age related in the novels.

The only real virgin in *The Darling Buds of May* is very likely Edith Pilchester. During a Gymkhana, Edith unwillingly participates in a donkey race; every other participant is a young girl. At the after party, Angela Snow commends Pop on the Gymkhana and everything involved: ““The seven foolish virgins. Scream. Couldn’t stop laughing. . . . ‘But you thought of the virgins. That was the stroke. Absolute genius. Absolute scream, the virgins’” (DBM 128). Angela even returns to the topic in *A Breath of Fresh Air*, still remembering the race of the virgins and the humour value of it (BFA 64). While Pauline’s lack of virginity is a matter of shame and insult, Edith and her virginity is something to laugh about. De Beauvoir notes that “many men . . . feel a sexual repugnance in the presence of maidenhood too prolonged” (163). Therefore virginity for young women is desirable; with older women, virginity becomes a source of pity and repulsion. Edith’s sexuality has “bloomed and faded without finding a place in the world of men; turned from its proper destination, it becomes an oddity” (Beauvoir 164). Her gift has now become a stigma, and to men she is crudely “full of cobwebs inside” (ibid). Since Edith has gone past her most fertile age and has not had children and



therefore not reached her “proper destination” of being a mother, she has wasted her virginity, or held onto her *gift* for too long, in Carpenter’s terms.

*A Breath of French Air* adds to the topic of virginity by introducing Angela Snow’s sister, Iris. She is described as an extremely pious woman, and, much like Edith, fairly unattractive and dry: “a solid, shortish blonde of rising thirty with a skin as hard as marble and more or less the colour of an acid drop.” (BFA 85) With Iris, the matter of virginity is somewhat different than with Edith. This is most likely an age-related matter; Edith is older than Iris, and when Pop jokingly tells Ma that the birth control pill might be just the thing for Edith, Ma replies, “Have a heart. Poor Edith. She drew the curtains a long time ago” (LWYF 45). Iris, however, is still considered young enough to be “fixed”. When Angela is telling Pop about Iris and her very religious ways and why she came to France with her, she says, “Thought I might find some arresting Breton fisherman to bed her down with. Sort of cure” (BFA 64).

This implies that not only is Iris’ virginity something that is wrong with her, but also that her overt religiousness is standing in the way of her losing it. Angela certainly sees her sister’s virginity as a flaw and seems to think that losing it would “cure” her – whether from her strict piousness or the virginity itself – and be for the better. This goes well with the aforementioned idea of “proper destination” by de Beauvoir, and the idea of virginity in general; Mariette was at the time of *The Darling Buds of May* still an unmarried 17-year-old and virginity for her was an ideal society appreciated, while Edith had already waited too long and therefore lost whatever value virginity has. Iris is somewhere in the middle of these two stages of virginity. She is not yet old enough to be a “lost cause”, but certainly not young enough for her virginity to be such a pure ideal as society would prefer it was with Mariette. Because her role as a woman is to reproduce, her virginity is no longer desirable, but a hindrance. It needs to be lost before she passes the point when it is no longer biologically possible for her to have children – or societally possible for her to acquire a husband to have children with.

Of course, Iris' virginity can be seen as the ideal situation due to her religion. She is so religious that she sobs her prayers and believes in suffering for her religion: "She's an Ill-fare Stater. The iller you fare the gooder you are" (BFA 64). However, this is not how the matter is seen in the novel. Throughout the novels, free sexuality is encouraged and all kinds of restrictions and rules are frowned upon. Therefore, Iris is not a virgin anymore at the end of *A Breath of French Air*. At a party held by the Larkins, she has a taste of Pop's punch, which he explains Angela and Iris is "Practically teetotal" (BFA 106), despite the drink consisting almost solely of rum, white wine, Curaçao, brandy, and Kirsch. (BFA 104) In addition to the slightly tipsy state Iris is in during the party, the French chef Alphonse lures her in. Curiously, Angela is the one Alphonse sets his eyes on first, but she does not much like him: "She didn't care for Alphonse. The process of being mentally undressed by strange men had never amused her. ... But now and then she couldn't help wondering what the virginal Iris would make of those too large, too handsome eyes" (BFA 102). Despite taking a dislike to the chef, Angela still entertains the idea of him meeting her sister. Alphonse is said to be a kind of a ladies' man, and one who does not miss an opportunity – during the party, Iris is trying to adjust her bosom several times due to lingerie problems, and this Alphonse sees as a sign of interest. The evening ends for Iris in the ocean, with Alphonse, when she "surrendered gladly to whatever was coming, with low sobs of joy" (BFA 124). This loss of virginity does, in fact, "cure" Iris from the "unnatural" state of abstinence and endless virginal praying, as it is revealed in *When the Green Woods Laugh* that she has gotten married. When Pop tells Angela he never thought Iris was the type, she replies, "Nor did she. Not until that party of yours at the Beau Rivage. That altered the outlook. She lost a precious possession there" (GWL 37). While virginity is a "precious possession", it is still worth losing, because it makes one a better person; this idea is also seen with Nurse Soaper, whose bad personality Ma accounts to her never having had "the pleasure" (LWYF 63) of sex.

In Iris' case, virginity as a stigma becomes important when thinking about *The Darling Buds of May* and the ideals there, and modern-day stigma of virginity. According to Carpenter,

“Sociologists consider a person stigmatized if he (or she) possesses a condition or attribute that, if it were known to others, would discredit him socially” (102). This holds true with the Larkin novels, starting with Mariette and Pauline’s little rivalry: in that instance, the lack of virginity is a stigma which would indeed ostracize a young woman, but the characters themselves are changing their views on the matter. With Iris, the stigma is beginning to be reversed. Her age certainly is a factor in why Angela is so keen to “cure” her sister, but Angela’s attitude towards Iris is showing signs of the modern thought of virginity itself being a stigma. She never expresses any kind of appreciation of her sister’s abstinence, despite it mostly likely being an important part of Iris’ religion and world view. To Angela, this is unnatural and strange, almost humorous, something to joke about with Pop. This attitude is something that is becoming more prevalent in the society, and by *A Little of What You Fancy*, nobody bats an eye at Primrose’s sexual adventures, and virginity, with whatever issues related to it, never even comes up. It must also be noted that women are often encouraged to see their own virginity as a gift, and men their own as a stigma (Carpenter 206), making the point of view of the Larkin novels somewhat masculine; the women rarely see their virginity as something that they should preserve, even though society expects that of them.

Carpenter’s third aspect of virginity, a process in growing up, is not as obvious in the novels as the two other aspects. However, it is still present in the *attitudes* themselves. Mariette and Pauline are constantly described more as women than as girls; they are sexually confident and attractive. They are no longer girls, and by the time Primrose takes a more prominent role in the novels – at the age of 14 – she is seen more as an adult than a girl, too. Sexuality seems to be the line drawn between girlhood and adulthood; the women described as sexually confident and experienced are more at ease and move through the novels with an air of comfort. The virgins, Edith and Iris, have none of that. They are timid, shy, and described as unattractive. Their virginity is holding them back, and while they are older than most sexually confident women in the novels, in some ways they seem more naïve than the others. Losing one’s virginity is clearly seen as a positive thing in the novels, because sex

itself is held in a very positive light. It is, therefore, a process the characters are expected to go through to become full, to achieve some goal that is not consciously set out for them. For Iris, this means marriage; for Mariette and Primrose, discovery and fun – growing up. For Edith it could mean a different view of the world, but as this never happens, one can only hazard a guess. Losing one's virginity is, in this sense, a rite of passage into something new.

There seems to be a constant progress going on in the novels, with *The Darling Buds of May* presenting virginity as something desirable but also as something which is losing its value as an ideal, and by the end of the novel series the value has faded when it comes to young women, and with older women it becomes more of a stigma than anything. The way virginity is dealt with in the Larkin novels is not so different from our society, even though the definitions and ways of interpretation might have changed. Virginity is still often seen as a gift with young women, and with young men as a stigma.

## **5. The Male-Female Relationship**

In this chapter I will examine the relationship between the male and the female characters, and how that relationship either conforms to or defies the society of the 1950s and the 1960s, and in what ways the relationship enforces emphasized femininity and supports patriarchal values. Included in the male-female relationships are the topics of marriage and fidelity, which are both closely connected to each other. As the previous chapter dealt more with female characters and the way their physical aspects are treated in the novels, such as their sexuality and how they use it, this chapter will focus on the relationships the women have with male characters. The physical side will also be present, but not in the same extent as in the previous chapter.

## 5.1 Marriage and Relationships: He Holds the Power

Marriage is a very powerful institution that, more often in the past than not, serves as a barrier of what is allowed and what is not. Around 1918 and still a while onwards in Britain, parents often chose spouses for their children, or screened the candidates and gave their child a choice between a few. (“For Better, For Worse”) Once one is married, certain activities become allowed and accepted, and even required. However, from 1936 onwards ideas about premarital sex were beginning to slowly change, but marriage remained a strong institution and a meaningful part of life; while divorce rates shot up after World War II, marriage was at the same time at its highest popularity – from the late 1940s to late 1950s a half a million British couples got married per year. (“For Better, For Worse”)

Generally, sex before marriage has been a taboo for the most part of the historical era: it was not allowed, and pre-marital children were a devastating occurrence for women. Especially in late-nineteenth-century Britain, the bastardy law was so strict that “the unmarried mother who was rejected by her family had very little recourse other than the workhouse”. (Lewis 11) Before marriage, women lived very limited lives when it came to sex – at least that is what society expected of them. While in the 1960s traditional gender roles were questioned, marriage was still popular and virginity was required from girls – the only way to have safe sex was to marry early, which was also what the church taught. (“To Love and Obey”) Society was very keen on these ideals, and the people were enforcing them. When Ma and Pop discuss Mariette’s pregnancy, their thoughts are not on what this change will mean for their daughter personally; they are more interested in finding out the father. When it turns out that the father candidates cannot do their share in the matter, Pop casually remarks, “Ah! well, we’ll think of something . . .” (DBM 4)

Marriage would, then, be the solution to Mariette’s problems. When one thinks of the 1950s and even the 1960s, the nuclear family easily comes to mind. The “proper” family structure consisted of a married couple, and two children. (“For Better, For Worse”) For many women, marriage was both a goal and the end of a line: it was socially desirable to marry, and yet many quit working

permanently once they married and had children. Marriage and motherhood were considered “a natural destiny” for women (Lewis 4), until the changes in attitude in the 1960s and 1970s. *The Darling Buds of May* approaches the matter from two perspectives: Mariette’s apparent desire to find a father for her child, and the partnership of Ma and Pop, the latter of which is a continuing theme throughout the series.

While the Larkin novels are very liberal when it comes to sexuality, the need to find Mariette a husband is a very conservative ideal. It “jars with the impression of sexual freedom and openness” (Head 7) and seems to be completely unlike the nature of the characters. As mentioned, the fact that Mariette is pregnant does not cause any objection in her family, and she is not reproached for it. It is, therefore, the appearances the family wishes to uphold by their desire to find Mariette a husband. Between the lines, they acknowledge that the society does not approve of illegitimate children and unmarried mothers, and so they set out to fix what the society thinks is wrong with the situation.

It is not entirely logical that Ma and Pop would behave this way, since they do not seem to have any problems with having children outside marriage; at the end of *The Darling Buds of May* it is revealed that these parents of six were never married themselves. In *A Breath of French Air* it is stated that they eloped when Ma was 16. While no regret is ever mentioned, it is possible that they faced difficulties when they were young, and do not want Mariette to experience the same.

Ma and Pop do not seem concerned about their non-married status. They briefly consider getting married at the end of the first novel, but it is Mr Charlton who tells them that when it comes to taxes, they are better off unmarried. Ma’s take on the matter is very nonchalant, and she says she would not mind getting married and that she is willing, “always was” (BFA 15). While Ma and Pop do not care about their marital status, others clearly do: when Mr Charlton talks them into not marrying, he almost says it is better to live in *sin*; this upsets Ma: “‘Don’t use that word,’ she said severely. ‘I know what you were going to say.’” (DBM 135) This goes to show that while Ma and Pop do not feel like they are doing anything wrong, they acknowledge the fact that the society does;

they refuse to be thought any less of because of this. *A Breath of French Air* sheds more light into the matter. When the French hotel owner, Mademoiselle Dupont, is about to kick the family out because of Ma and Pop's marital status, Pop says to her, "If Ma and me don't mind why should you?" (BFA 47) This is a very progressive way of thinking in the 1950s and shows that the novel takes a stand in the matter: why should society decide about your personal life, when it hurts nobody? A relationship can be functional without permission from the society.

However, despite the nonchalant take Ma and Pop seem to have towards marriage, there is something more to be detected in Ma's remarks on the matter. The aforementioned line of hers about always having been willing to marry is not alone in its kind. When Ma and Pop discuss the possible relationship of Angela and the Brigadier, the thought of marriage comes up again when Ma says, "Perhaps he's going to ask her to marry him. Lucky girl." (GWL 118) This is followed by Pop ignoring "whatever slight reproach about matrimony there might have been in Ma's voice" (GWL 118). This implies that Ma at least would not mind marriage at all, but that Pop is not as enthused about it. When their non-married status becomes an issue during their holiday in France, Mr Charlton remarks that perhaps they should have gotten married after all, but the response of Pop is not overly joyful: "'Well, I suppose we still could,' Pop said, but not with apparent enthusiasm." (BFA 15)

It is true that in the 1950s and the 1960s marriage was far more important to women than for men, especially since at the time the woman was seen as a wife and a mother rather than a contributor to the household economy. Spinsterhood was a fear for many, as "the figures of old maids and spinsters are a location for personality traits widely believed to be unattractive and by implication unmarriageable in women" (Holden 7), and marrying, and through that having children was the only way to achieve a "completely fulfilled life" (ibid.). In the Larkin series, Ma is, in fact, the mother and the wife – not officially but in every other way – and her job is to take care of the family while Pop is the one to make money. While their relationship seems to be on a strong basis, it is not so strange that Ma would want to marry; it is, after all, what the society wants from her and is telling her is the

right thing to do. Whatever a person might feel is right for them, the society they live in will always have some influence on their life and subconsciously they might aim to fulfil the expectations of the society. If Ma, growing up in the 1920s and 1930s, has always been influenced by a pro-marriage atmosphere, it is more than likely that it is embedded deep in her. This on its part supports a patriarchal society; although typical for the era the characters live in, marriage and thus committing to a man is seen as something that the women are supposed to want and when they cannot achieve this goal, their life is not complete. A major aspect of the women's lives is therefore solely bound on men.

Despite the underlying bitterness one might detect in Ma, she seems generally very happy in her relationship. This also applies to Pop, who regards Ma as the most important person in his life. She is the "sharer of all his secrets" (OTE 120), and the one with whom he can discuss even his escapades with other women. They are very close, and a husband and a wife in all but name – so far so that Pop refers to her as his wife once (BFA 45) and Ma to him as her husband (LWYF 64), despite neither of them really using the actual terms often. What these instances demonstrate is that they are as good as married in their own eyes; society has very little to say on how they feel about each other and their marital status. It is entirely possible that the reason the couple remains unmarried is that there is no reason for them to marry. Since they do not greatly care what the world thinks about their relationship and have managed quite well without a blessing from the church or a leave from the government, the reasons for getting married are more to do with the expectations from the society than anything else. They have brought eight children into the world by the end of the last novel, and their relationship is described as endlessly loving and caring; Ma is infinitely important to Pop, and Ma's love for him is "as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar and as deep as the ocean" (LWYF 105).

While Ma might seem like the one secretly wishing for marriage and been denied it by Pop, who is not so keen on it, it does not mean that she is unequal to him in their relationship. She does not truly argue with him often, or disagree with him, but when she does, he knows he had better do as she says:



... Ma proceeded to remonstrate rather severely with Pop, ... actually calling him Sydney Larkin several times, which he was fully aware was the greatest expression of reprimand she could muster.

‘If I thought you’d been larking about with the poor dear and upsetting her, Sydney Larkin, I wouldn’t half give you what for with the chill off. I might even keep you *rationed* –’

‘Good Gawd, Ma, steady. I never done a thing –’

‘Well, I believe you. Thousands wouldn’t. ... You’ll have to be very, very nice to her.’

‘Yes, but –’

‘Never mind yes, but. ... And you’ve got to keep sober too.’

‘Good Gawd, Ma, have a bit of heart. ...’ (OTE 77, italics original)

She holds power over him as only a strong wife is able to, and he knows when to listen. Perhaps it is because otherwise Ma is very relaxed and accepting of everything that when she feels she has reason to reprimand Pop, she knows it will have weight. Calling him by his name and not the endearing “Pop” is also a sign of disapproval: “She only did it once or twice a year – so he’d know it really meant something when she did.” (BFA 79) Here, she is not the obedient and kind wife which is a part of emphasized femininity; of course, her personality as a whole opposes the concept in any case. As wives or life-partners go, Ma is incredibly open-minded and forgiving of Pop’s antics, as will be discussed more in the next section, and therefore it is not often that she puts her foot down. They both have power in their relationship, but it is implied that the man is still the more active one, the initiator of everything; after all, if Ma wishes to marry, she never openly asks Pop about it. This becomes a poignant aspect of the novels with the following exchange with Mademoiselle Dupont:

‘And will you perhaps marry one day?’

Pop patted her playfully on the roundest part of her corset with an especially warm affectionate hand, and laughed loudly. Mademoiselle Dupont had never known hands so warm.

‘Shall if somebody asks me.’

‘Someone will,’ she told him with transfixed, shining eyes. ‘I’m sure that someone will.’ (BFA 125)

This, then, implies that Ma has never asked. It is deeply engraved in the Western society that the man is the one to propose, especially at the time the novels were written. Yet Ma and Pop’s relationship is unconventional in every other way but apparently this one. She cannot, or will not, ask him even if she wanted to, and he will not ask her. Here, the man is the one to decide and be the head of the

relationship. However, in the above quote, it becomes apparent that both Pop and Mademoiselle Dupont seem to fully accept the option of a woman proposing to a man, although it might be more a case of flirting on her part than a deeper comment on the society.

The man being the head of the family and the so-called leader in the partnership comes up with Mr Charlton and Mariette, as well. During the family's holiday in France, Mariette is more interested in sunbathing and flirting with the handsome French men than seeing the sights Mr Charlton has deep nostalgia for. Mr Charlton is very passive about it all, despite it bothering him greatly, until he gets drunk and demands that she go with him on the little train he used to ride as a child. Mr Charlton does not often tell Mariette what to do, and probably would not have done anything about her flirting with other men had he not been drunk; this, curiously, seems to solve their problems at once. Another instance earlier on showcases similar power relations in marriage:

Only Mariette ... had shown any reluctance to go ... largely on the ground that it would interfere with her scheme for browning her body all over, but Charley had rumbled that. He had shown *swift and admirable marital firmness* and had, to Pop's great satisfaction, insisted she should go. (BFA 62, italics added)

In this case, the proper manly thing to do is to give no other options. Whether this speaks for the more dominant role of the husband, which is desired, or the general nature of Mr Charlton, can be debated. Mr Charlton, as a character, is more of a quiet, intellectual type rather than a strong, dominant type. This even leads Ma and Pop to doubt his abilities in being able to have children: he is seen almost as a weak man, at least in comparison to the muscular French men courting Mariette. Therefore Charley's sudden "marital firmness" can be a positive thing in Pop's mind, in that he is asserting his position as the dominant, strong male, which is often seen as an example of masculinity, as men are supposed to be "physically strong and authoritative while women are physically weak and submissive" (Charlebois 30). This is something Ma and Pop clearly wish from their son-in-law; while they are greatly amazed at his intellect, they also suspect he might not be sexually up-to-par.

Since Mr Charlton getting drunk and demanding something of Mariette seems to solve their marital problems, it can be said that assertive, authoritative masculinity is a desired feature in men,

and in husbands; if they assert their power over their wives, the relationship is all the better for it. Power is something closely connected to marriage and women's position in the situation, as there are signs of wives' sense of control decreasing during marriage, while the husbands experience no such change (Ross 832), since by tradition, "custom, law, and religion give men more power in marriage" (ibid.). Mr Charlton, not being a so-called "alpha male", has to prove his masculinity in some other way. Mariette, however, is extremely womanly and attractive, which is a certain kind of power she can wield in the marriage:

It is apparent ... that the man who desires or values the woman as a mate more than she desires or values him will be in the position of wanting to please her. Her enchantment in his eyes may be physical attractiveness, pleasing personality, his perception of her as a "perfect" wife and mother, or an artefact of his own poor self-image. The advantage a woman derives from this power relationship may go a long way to counteract advantages built into the culture for the husband. The woman, however, must be willing to take the dominant position in this respect *and retain it*, since she can *nullify it by voluntarily giving control to her husband*. (Hallenbeck 201, italics added)

Mr Charlton and Mariette's relationship is indeed slightly out of balance: she is someone who could have, and has had, anyone she would like, while he seems somewhat inexperienced in courtship and sex. He does not have traditionally good looks when he meets Mariette, either, and the context in which their relationship begins has less to do with her wanting him for *him*, but with her supposed pregnancy and the need to find a husband and the family's need to avoid paying taxes. He, on the other hand, is quickly lured in by her attractiveness, and very little is actually said about their mental compatibility. Therefore the marriage is already unequal, and while he has his moments of masculine power, it is rather rare; she, however, is continuously attractive and sexual. It would, then, seem that when she succumbs to Mr Charlton's will in *A Breath of French Air*, she nullifies the control she had, as Hallenbeck mentions. Since this has a positive influence on their relationship, it can be concluded that it is good for the marriage that the wife does not have too great a power over her husband, and that the husband should assert his dominant masculinity in order to have control over his wife.

Mr Charlton's sudden assertiveness and its positive results are examples of how patriarchy affects the lives of the characters, as authoritative behaviour is desirable:

In every society the shaping of an individual masculine or feminine personality is based on what the dominant male group values on itself and finds useful in subordinates: intelligence, force, efficacy in the male; ignorance, docility, virtue in the female. The young boy is encouraged to become aggressive, the young girl to repress her aggressiveness. (Fortier 278)

Because aggressiveness is expected from men, Mr Charlton's change in behaviour proves to be effective. Marriage is, then, patriarchal: the husband is expected to have the most control, and to be the one making all the major decisions while the wife is submissive and follows his lead. Mr Charlton is fulfilling the ideals of a "dominant male group" – the society he is a part of – and therefore the results are seen as nothing but positive.

The series portrays attraction and relationship-building mostly in terms of sex-appeal, rather than mental compatibility not only in Mr Charlton and Mariette's case, but with Primrose and Mr Candy, as well. Mr Candy is enthralled and tormented by Primrose's beauty and seductiveness, and he eventually succumbs to it. All the reader gets to know about their relationship is that they have plenty of sex, and that she loves to cite poetry to him and discuss it, although Mr Candy might not be as excited about the poetry itself: "... said Mr Candy, who had long since become resigned to poetry being mixed with love." (LWYF 110) While the two of them meet at some kind of intellectual level with the unifying matter of poetry, it is still the sexuality that rises to the top when thinking about their relationship. Primrose says she is in love with him, but as far as the storytelling goes, the basis of this love is sexual desire and some form of shared interest in poetry. It is not, of course, necessary to describe a relationship in painful detail in any story, or to explain why the characters are in love with each other; but when the topmost thing connected to the couple is sex, it does leave the reader wondering if there ever was more to the relationship than that.

Not all attitudes within the Larkin family are positive about liberal relations and not being married: Mr Charlton (himself having married Mariette), saying in *The Darling Buds of May* that it would be smarter for Pop and Ma not to marry, seems to have a change of heart by *Oh! To Be in England* when he learns that the Larkin children are not baptised:

Mr Charlton for once felt shocked. It was heathenish. It simply wasn't the thing. *It had been hard enough for him to get used to the fact that Ma and Pop weren't married* and that in painful consequence all the seven children, including his own wife, had been born out of wedlock, but this new discovery was too much. (OTE 15, italics added)

There is no foundation for this horror Mr Charlton experiences that the reader can see. Nowhere was it ever mentioned that he had a hard time getting to terms with the Larkins' way of life, considering he was the one suggesting that Ma and Pop stay unmarried, and this attitude of his really does clash with not only his previous thoughts, but also the liberal atmosphere of the novels. One might guess that Mr Charlton here embodies the traditional attitudes still prevalent in the society of the 1960s, but as all other characters who the reader is supposed to like and who are friends of the Larkins' do not care about the matter or are accepting of it, it is a strange change of heart for Mr Charlton. Whether his attitude is a mere plot point can be argued on – the baptising of all the Larkin children has biographical basis, as Bates did the same with his children (Baldwin 211), and *Oh! To Be in England* is more religious in tone than the previous novels, as well. Despite Mr Charlton's sudden disapproval and the mass baptising, Ma and Pop still remain unmarried. As Mr Charlton comes from the city, and is educated unlike the Larkins, a reading that he is an Other in this situation can be considered. He is always the one introducing the Larkins to new and fancy things, be it French, or what to serve at a cocktail party; he is someone who is always a bit outside the family circle. His background is different and he was brought up differently, and it is no surprise that he would think differently about certain things. In this occasion, then, he is the Other representing the opinions and views of the world outside the Larkin sphere, and this does match the attitude of the late 1950s and the 1960s: despite all the changes happening especially in the 1960s, most people did respect traditional values, including marriage. ("To Love and Obey")

As discussed, the novels portray marriage in two, somewhat contrasting ways. First, it is seen socially desirable and the characters seem to acknowledge this; second, it does not have such a great significance to the characters personally as could be expected. In both cases, marriage is more valuable to the women than to the men. It is the women who need marriage in order to be secure with

their lives and relationships. Mariette needs a husband for her unborn child, which is understandable considering the society she lives in. However, as the Larkins are liberal and generally do not seem to care about what other people think of them, it is increasingly strange that the whole family is so keen on finding someone for her. However, as this is how the characters treat the matter, Mariette is seen as someone who has erred and the situation can only be fixed with marriage; after all, “It is quite evident that under a patriarchal system, women are made to pay heavily for sexuality, either with undesired pregnancy or by bearing alone the responsibility of contraception” (Fortier 281). Therefore Mariette has done something that is reserved for married people only, and instead of accepting her and her situation as is, her family starts actively seeking out a socially acceptable solution.

Marriage also gains much power and support in the novels as it is something the female characters seem to want for themselves. Even though Ma and Pop’s relationship is good and happy, Ma still wishes she was married. There is no necessity for marriage, and yet she would not mind marrying. This implies there is something missing in Ma’s life, even though everything is otherwise fine with her family and relationship with Pop.

## **5.2 Everybody Needs Variety: Infidelity**

One of the more striking aspects of a series of novels written in the 1950s and the 1960s is the liberal take on relationships and love. The characters seem to be able to live happily in a secure relationship while also dallying about with others at the same time. The most obvious example of this is Pop, whose hobby seems to be flirting with other women. In this section, terms *infidelity* and *adultery* are crucial. They are, of course, two slightly different things. Infidelity can mean not being faithful to your wife or husband, but also your partner, while adultery is in the OALD defined as sex between a married person and someone who is not their husband or wife. (“adultery”) Of course, infidelity does not rule out adultery, while adultery is quite clearly seen as a sexual act. Traditionally, “infidelity was

considered the breaking of a contract of sexual exclusivity between two people who are dating, married, or otherwise in a committed relationship” (Hertlein, Wetchler & Piercy 6), but the definition has become wider and more complex; infidelity can also mean “varying degrees of physical intimacy, . . . and even emotional intimacy with another person to the detriment of the primary relationship” (ibid.).

Ma and Pop’s relationship is described as a generally happy one. It is not, however, entirely monogamous. One of the recurring themes in the novels is Pop’s adventures with other women – some less desirable to him than others – and Ma is completely accepting of this. She even encourages this kind of behaviour several times in the novels. In this section I will focus on three aspects related to this: first Pop’s escapades with other women and how he feels about it, second the women who Pop flirts with and how they feel about Pop and his relationship to Ma, and finally Ma and her thoughts and feelings on her spouse’s adventures – and also an adventure of her own. I argue that while Ma and Pop’s relationship is progressive for their time, it also supports traditional male-female roles and patriarchal values.

Although Ma and Pop are not married, their relationship is much that of a married couple; or at least as solid as a modern partnership of an unmarried couple. Therefore I will treat their relationship as seriously as I would any unmarried couple who have stayed together for years and have had several children, as the society they live in considers marriage as the norm and Pop’s women seldom know Pop and Ma are not married. That they are married is the general assumption of other characters as well as the reader until the end of *The Darling Buds of May*; Ma is called Mrs Larkin, and Ma and Pop seem to be as good as married in their own eyes.

De Beauvoir claims that “adultery can disappear only with marriage itself. For the aim of marriage is in a way to immunize man against *his own* wife: but other women keep – for him – their heady attraction; and to them he will turn”. (198) This is not quite the case with Pop, as he still finds Ma desirable and is not “immune” to her; they have a rich sex life and find each other attractive.

However, there is some truth in de Beauvoir's statement. The women he courts are somehow always different from Ma – Angela is fair and aristocratic, Edith is shy and timid, and the rest also have a feature that separates them from Ma, be it their nationality, class, or looks. He treats them in a different way, and feels about them differently.

Pop is a great lover of women, and never misses a chance of trying to go a bit further with them. The first "other woman" the reader is introduced to is Edith Pilchester, someone who Pop regularly flirts with. To him, she is nothing more than a friend. He directs his advances to her almost out of habit than of actual desire, as if that is just a part of any friendship he would have with a woman. It must be noted that most women he considers himself friends with have also been the targets of his advances, and he the target of their admiration or even love. This is a role he never gives any consideration to. His behaviour, in his mind, is nothing but having a bit of fun. He never stops to think about what his actions mean to the women, or what kind of influence he has on them; he is someone they may want, but can never have for their own. This never seems to bother him beyond few moments. Angela even confesses to him that she has deeper feelings for him:

'Suppose you know I'm madly in love with you?'  
 Pop confessed he didn't know. It was news.  
 'Outrageously. All-consuming,' she said. 'Night and day.'  
 'Jolly good,' Pop said. 'Perfick.'  
 'Not on your nelly,' she said. 'It's hell.' (BFA 71)

Pop's initial reaction is positive, as if he can only see love as a positive thing despite the fact that all he can offer her is casual flirting and caressing. Angela, despite her laid-back reactions to everything, is implying she is not as keen on her feelings; she knows Pop can never be really hers. Pop's following reaction does not change much:

A recurrent lick or two of fire from the Rolls-Royce [a drink] raced about Pop's veins and caused him to say that this was crazy.  
 'Right first time,' she said. 'Crazy. Mad. Mad as those hares.'  
 For crying out gently, Pop thought. That was bad. By the way, had she ever seen those hares? (BFA 71)



This confession does not change the way Pop interacts with Angela – it is as if he does not take it seriously enough, and after this neither one really brings the matter up again with each other. While Pop likes the women he fools around with, he does not love them; even Angela, described as his kindred spirit (BFA 63), does not evoke love-like feelings in him, and he is more interested in her friendship, and her sexuality and looks: “. . . Pop said good-bye to what he thought, with pleasure but *detachment*, was the nicest body he had ever seen since he first met Ma.” (BFA 74, italics added) He muses that it is “essential to keep all those things . . . on a light-hearted level. Else it wouldn’t be fair to Ma” (BFA 72). He does not have the same kind of emotional connection with the other women as he does with Ma, whom he sees as the one with priority, the wife; and he is never jealous of any of the women he flirts with. Pop seems to be of the opinion that emotional connection is infidelity, while physical connection is not; as mentioned in an earlier quote of Hertlein, Wetchler, and Piercy, infidelity can mean several things, and to Pop the definition of infidelity is emotional connection with a third party.

It can be safely said that Pop does not regard his flings as anything more than friends or a bit of sexual fun. He never forms a deeper emotional connection with them, and does not see flirting or sex as anything but simple fun. It only rarely occurs to him that the women he is with might not feel the same and can have deeper feelings, but in his world, fun is all there is to his affairs. The fact that Ma and Pop are not married might even have a greater impact on their relationship than at first glance would be obvious. In a good-natured conversation between Angela and Ma, the matter comes up rather clearly:

‘Don’t you ever think of marrying Pop?’  
 . . . ‘What?’ [Ma] said, ‘and give him a chance to leave me?’  
 ‘Scream,’ Angela Snow said. ‘Suppose he might at that.’  
 ‘Off like a hare.’ (BFA 101)

Ma and Pop also briefly discuss the matter:

‘You know something, Syd Larkin?’  
 ‘No, Ma. What?’  
 ‘I believe if I’d married you,’ Ma said, ‘you’d have committed bigamy long ago.’

‘More than likely,’ Pop said with great cheerfulness, ‘more than likely.’ (OTE 54)

These two interactions imply that because Ma and Pop are not married, they – and especially Pop – are free to do whatever they want with other people, and that if they were married, all that would not be allowed. Because they are unmarried, no rules are broken when Pop dallies around with other women. The claim seems to be that marriage is a trap which would confine them and make flings punishable, while living out of wedlock, still being together like a husband and a wife, makes everything acceptable – and as the latter quote would imply, Pop would even become a bigamist if he once married. This statement can mean two things: either Pop, hypothetically having married Ma, would then proceed to marry every other woman he courts for equality’s sake (something Ma warns Pop about during a party; “‘Got to treat us all the same,’ . . . ‘No favouritism.’” (BFA 122)) and because affairs with one’s own wife cannot be considered infidelity; or simply Ma and Pop, being uneducated and often stumped with words, are using the term *bigamy* here in some other sense than what its core definition really is, for humorous effect. In any case, it is implied that complete fidelity or absolute monogamy is near impossible to Pop. Mademoiselle Dupont notices the curious state of affairs as well: “‘It was when I was looking at the passports this morning,’ Mademoiselle Dupont said. ‘It was *très curieux* – very *curieux* – but it occurred to me that if you are not married you are still a single man?’” (BFA 61, italics original) Not being married is here compared to not having a relationship at all, since Pop is clearly not “single” in the sense of the word which we know today. This in itself speaks for the importance of marriage at the time, as discussed in the previous section, but can also be a way for Mademoiselle Dupont and the other women to feel better about themselves when being seduced by Pop.

This attitude to fidelity and marriage may indeed be why Ma and Pop stay unmarried throughout the series; it enables Pop’s escapades with other women and gives him freedom to do so. Fidelity, then, is connected to marriage rather than a relationship, and as de Beauvoir mentioned in the earlier quote, where there is no adultery, there is no marriage. It is also a matter which makes Ma and Pop

immune to the law, in a sense: neither spouse has any legal right to accuse the other of adultery, since technically they are not a husband and a wife. So while society disapproves of their way of living, it cannot accuse them of adultery. It might not, in fact, be such a strange situation to be in when looked at from the perspective of our time: Ma and Pop could very well be in a sexually open relationship. While not the norm today, and certainly not in the 1950s and 1960s, it is a type of a relationship that exists and can work for some couples. Both Ma and Pop are accepting of flirting and courting outside their relationship, while still being deeply in love with each other. In their contemporary society's eyes, then, they are an anomaly, while in our time they would be an example of one out-of-the-norm but still recognizable type of relationship.

As mentioned, Angela, starting out as a good friend to Pop, falls in love with him. She is very aware of Ma, and knows where his loyalties lie – despite this, there is never any kind of jealousy towards Pop's life partner on her behalf. Other women, however, do make Angela jealous. When Pop shows attention to Mademoiselle Dupont, Angela finds herself feeling off about it: “. . . [she] realized suddenly that she was madly, unreasonably jealous. It was quite unlike her.” (BFA 108) She even goes as far as wanting to “smack Mademoiselle Dupont's face as hard as she could” (BFA 126). This is an example of who Angela feels on par with; she knows that Ma and Pop's relationship is on such a secure level that it is not possible to compete with her. However, other women such as Mademoiselle Dupont, who do not have the same kind of security as Ma, are equal to Angela. They receive the same kind of attention from Pop, and where Ma is untouchable, the other women in his life are not.

Despite being in love with Pop, Angela does not change her behaviour. She does not try to steal Pop away, or disrupt his relationship with Ma; she, like Edith, becomes passive and takes whatever attention she can get from Pop. Edith is especially passive when it comes to Pop. While she greatly enjoys every bit of affection she gets from him, she cannot flirt and almost never suggests anything to him. It is usually Pop who makes the first move, and she always succumbs gladly. Whereas Angela knows well that Ma is accepting of her and Pop's escapades – to the point that Ma encourages her to

do it – Edith is not on the same page with them. Ma knows about Edith and Pop, but Edith is unaware that Ma knows. To her, everything is a secret that she would be ashamed to reveal. It is not mentioned how she feels about Ma in relation to Pop’s actions, but she does not wish anyone to know about it. Edith clearly wishes to be with Pop more, and even fantasizes about encounters with him, as their tender kisses in *The Darling Buds of May* really seemed to affect her deeply:

Ever since that time she had longed, over and over again, to give all she’d got. She’d give it any time. Sometimes, in fact, she gave it in the last moments before sleep, metaphorically wrapped in Pop’s arms, murmuring to herself, as in an intoxicated lullaby, that it was perfect, absolutely perfect, and urging Pop, if possible, to do it again. (LWYF 29-30)

She is living a one-sided fantasy, and Ma never factors into it. To Edith, there is only her Pop, and Ma is curiously excluded from that equation. Edith still likes Ma very much, but her fantasies are nothing but fantasies – she never seems to take them further or make them more real.

A common theme with Pop’s flings seems to be that either they are aware of the fact that Ma knows about Pop’s antics and that Ma is fine with it, like Angela, or they simply approve of Pop’s behavior towards them and pay little to no attention to the matter of him not being free to be with them, like Edith and Mademoiselle Dupont. They accept the attention they are given without questioning Pop’s actions or being troubled by his relationship with Ma. If looked at from the perspective of an open relationship, this is understandable; some of the women, however, are more aware of this than others.

Throughout the novels it is mostly Pop who does the extradyadic dallying, and Ma is the one simply approving it while rarely doing anything herself. Her attitude is constantly positive towards Pop’s antics, and she does not have many flings herself. At one point the weather reminds her of the times she used to go out and about, and she muses she does not have “any intention of going courting” (BFA 2). Ma even feels sorry if Pop does not have anyone to court or admire; as the French women turn out a disappointment in *A Breath of French Air*, she feels bad for Pop because there is nothing for him to look at. (BFA 58) Her general idea seems to be that “flirting is good for people” (BFA 78).

However, an open relationship does not entirely seem to cover Ma and Pop's relationship, as Ma once asks Pop, "What do you think I let you run around with Angela Snow and old Edith Pilchester for?" (BFA 77), and the answer is "variety". Ma seems to be of the opinion that a working relationship requires variety; she even recommends flirting to Mariette, who by then has married Mr Charlton (BFA 78). However, the fact that she "lets" Pop go around with other women implies that their relationship is not entirely open in the sense that they are free to be with anyone they like. There is an air of Ma allowing something that she could stop allowing, but she feels that it would not be beneficial to deny Pop of the intimate company of other women.

There is also a hint of jealousy involved in Ma and Pop's relationship when it is Ma's turn to not be entirely faithful to Pop. Ma never expresses jealousy of any of Pop's women, and likes all of them. At first it seems that Pop is not jealous either, but matters are changed with the introduction of Sir John Furlington-Snow. As mentioned earlier, Sir John is as much of a ladies' man as Pop, if not worse and more ruthless. He is charming and educated, and Ma is not only impressed by his title, *Queen's Counsel*, but by his charm as well. At the party towards the end of *A Little of What You Fancy*, Ma and Sir John go to the garden to look at her flowers. As all the women around the dinner table are smitten with Sir John, they are all jealous of the attention he gives Ma. Not only that, "there was also a glint of it in Pop's eye, a fact for which she wasn't in the least bit sorry" (LWYF 174). This brings up two facts: first, that Pop is jealous of Ma; second, that Ma does not mind that at all. It even comes off as spiteful, as if Ma was pleased to see Pop being jealous.

In the middle of Ma and Sir John's private moments among the flowers Ma starts to think whether it would be alright to do something more:

Inspired by these proceedings and several further warm, long and impassioned kisses Ma started to wonder. What would happen if she went a bit further, sort of? Any harm? Might be nice. She rather felt in that mood. After all she was . . . a bit short of practice these days. (LWYF 183)

What stops Ma from actually going further is not directly related to Pop; she does not wonder what he would think, and in fact he does not even cross her mind. What stops her is the fact that she might

get pregnant. She uses no contraception, and although she thinks of the Pill, she reckons there is no time to go find one and there is no-one to ask one for. (LWYF 184) Even this might not have held her back, but her two youngest children come to find her and put a stop to the fun:

‘Ma’, they said, their eyes bright from lamplight and their voices equally bright from pink champagne, ‘Pop sent us to find you. He says it’s getting late and he wants to go to bed.’

‘No peace for the wicked,’ Ma said and, half-wished, embalmed in the deep rich night-fragrance of lilies, that she had been after all. (LWYF 184)

Thus it is because of Pop that Ma does not go any further with Sir John, but not because she herself chose not to – because Pop sent children to find her to tend to his needs, knowing where she was and with whom. Ma never tells Pop what happened between her and Sir John, and it is not said whether Pop suspects something; his jealousy was mentioned, and he tries to bring the matter of Sir John up in a conversation when Ma and him are going to bed after the scene above:

‘Quite a bit of a character, Angela’s father,’ Pop said.

Quite a bit of a character, Ma agreed, quite a bit of a character.

‘Spot him at lunchtime? With Sister Trevelyan? Something going on there.’

‘Oh?’ Ma said serenely, not merely as if greatly surprised but at the same time as if not knowing what the something was even if it had been going on.

‘You can see where Angela gets it from.’

‘Well, you should know.’

Dreamily musing for another moment or two, Ma remembered the lilies, the heavenly scent of them and how Sir John had said her skin had been so like their petals. (LWYF 185)

Ma does not even hint at knowing there being anything going on with Sir John and Sister Trevelyan, let alone with herself. While Ma is well aware of everything that Pop does with other people, the same cannot be said the other way around. If this is indeed an open relationship, Ma seems to be very secretive about her own adventures. It might also be that Ma and Pop are not on the same page about their relationship and its rules. Hertlein, Wetchler, and Piercy mention that “two different people in the same relationship might have different ideas about what represents infidelity or constitutes an affair” (6). Ma seems to be keener on hiding her escapades than Pop, and Pop seems to express more jealousy than Ma.

The reason for the slight imbalance in Ma and Pop's behaviour can be attributed to historical reasons, and Ma's concerns about pregnancy and the Pill:

. . . woman's adultery risks bringing the son of a stranger in the family, and thus defrauding legitimate heirs; the husband is master the wife his property. Social changes, the practice of birth control, have robbed these motivations of much of their force. But the continuing will to keep woman in a state of dependency perpetuates the prohibitions that still surround her. She frequently interiorizes them; she closes her eyes to her husband's marital vagaries, though her religion, her morality, her 'virtue,' forbid the same behavior on her part. (Beauvoir 580)

Therefore Ma's fear of pregnancy is not for her own sake – as a mother of eight, she is not afraid of the physical side of the matter – but for Pop's. If the husband is the master, then it is the wife who is at fault if she gets pregnant with another man's child, while the husband does not have similar fears about conceiving children with someone other than his wife. Because Ma is in a relationship with Pop, she cannot have the same liberty as he does, as she has interiorized the age-old rules of gender and relationship.

The novels state a few things about relationships and fidelity, then: first, that a traditional, entirely monogamous marriage is not necessary in order to have a good, working relationship with one's significant other; second, that infidelity is seen more acceptable for men than for women, as exemplified by Pop's behavior and Ma's doubts about having an extradyadic affair; third, that while the novels are careful about showing women who are in a relationship desiring other men, they do show that women sometimes *want* it. Ma, while in the end not going as far as possible with Sir John, still wanted to, and was not portrayed as a chaste woman who regrets her impure thoughts and returns to her husband by her own will. However, the fact that Ma, in the end, does not go very far with Sir John and only has this one instance of extradyadic courting, supports a very patriarchal ideal of society as well as emphasized femininity: it is the women who are supposed to be faithful and more chaste than men, and to stay this way whether their respective others court other women or not. Even Mariette and Primrose stop actively seeking out other men once they find their spouses, and this is seen as the proper thing to do, as will be further discussed in the next chapter.

## **6. Male Fantasy: Femininity, Patriarchy, and Double Standards**

In this chapter I will look into the Larkin novels from the perspective that the novels portray a universe in which men are privileged; everything always goes well for them, and the women exist for their pleasure. I will also explore how this patriarchal society treats femininity, and in which ways women are encouraged to be traditionally feminine, and when it is acceptable for them to break this role – and why. I argue that although the female characters are shown to be independent and strong, they are presented as such in ways which are preferable to men.

Male fantasy is here not meant as mere sexual fantasy; rather, the term is used to describe the ways in which life in the Larkin novels is convenient for the male characters. The key character in this respect is Pop. I will look into the matter of male fantasy through his behaviour and how the environment he is in reacts to it. This will be done through some of the themes already discussed in this thesis, but the focus will also be on aspects of Pop's life: the fact that everyone loves him, and those who do not are described as somehow faulty. Also his lifestyle and relations with women, both Ma and the others, will be looked into, as well as society's take on his actions, and this will be exemplified with the court case, where Mrs Jerebohm accuses him of attempted violation. In addition to the examination of Pop, I will also look into the other male characters and the women as well, and the general atmosphere of the novels as portrayed by male and female characters alike. The behaviour of the women is in many ways desirable to men, which will be a key aspect of this chapter.

It is noteworthy that all the female characters in the novel were written by a male author, therefore offering a male image of what women and sexuality are, or what they should be. In many ways, the series depicts women as merely sexual objects, and the lack of sex appeal makes them inferior to other women and undesirable to men. As the world was very much that of a man's in the two decades in question, it is not surprising that the point of view would be masculine. I will not



dwell on the author in this regard, however, but this is an aspect that needs to be taken into account when examining the portrayal of the characters.

Pop is throughout the novels a well-liked character, who has plenty of friends and never seems to quarrel with anyone. His relationship with his family is good, and he has loyal friends. He is portrayed as a generally pleasant person who welcomes everyone to his home and shares much with them. His behaviour towards women is also seen in a jolly, positive light, and the women – for the most part – enjoy this. The mind-set of the Larkins' is a very liberal one, and sexuality is not excluded from this. Therefore a natural part of Pop's life is sexuality, and everything connected to it.

As discussed earlier, Ma and Pop's relationship is good and open, if not completely without issues. The fact that they are not married is significant when considering the time period, and it is also very modern in its openness. However, when considering the matter from the perspective of a man, and that of patriarchy, it is very convenient for Pop that his relationship with Ma is what it is. First, he gets to live a secure family life with a woman who loves him, cooks for him, takes care of his children, and sexually satisfies him. At the same time he is able to flirt with other women as much as he likes, and Ma never objects to this. Neither Ma nor Pop's lady friends ever get insulted because of his adventures with others; even when Angela feels jealous about Mademoiselle Dupont, her anger is not directed towards Pop but another woman. The other women never cause any trouble to Pop and Ma, no matter how much they love Pop and wish to be with him. While not being married is a very modern idea for the 1950s and the 1960s, and Ma and Pop's thoughts of it are equally modern, it must be considered whether this state of affairs exists simply to justify Pop's behaviour. As previously discussed, Ma and Pop's relationship is good and in some ways they are as good as married, while in others they present a relationship type which is still rather rare. This, however, leaves a loop hole for Pop: if he and Ma are not married, then his adventures with other women are not acts of adultery. While extramarital affairs have always been more acceptable for men than for women, adultery has generally never been completely acceptable; in the 1960s, getting a divorce in Britain was hard as

according to the law, adultery was the only reason that would justify it. (“To Love and Obey”) The weight of the matter must not be underestimated, therefore. As Pop and Ma are not married, no rules are broken. Pop is free to court other women as much as he likes, because nobody can tell him that what he is doing is wrong – Ma accepts it, and as he is not married, society cannot judge him as it would judge an adulterer. Of course, this means that Ma would, in theory, have the same right; however, that never truly happens. Thus Ma stays loyal to Pop, and as a woman demonstrates the kind of passivity which is crucial to emphasized femininity.

More telling of male fantasy is the women’s attitudes when it comes to Pop, sex, and life. The main aspect of this is of course Ma and her accepting nature. She never forbids him from courting others, nor does she ever so much as imply being jealous of him. Pop, on the other hand, feels jealous of Ma, who in turn is not as open about her and Sir John as Pop is about his women. Ma is almost unreal as a life partner, as nothing seems to phase her and she sees Pop’s actions as nothing but healthy. She is tempted by Sir John once, but does nothing in the end, and so remains more or less faithful to Pop. All the women in Pop’s life love him, albeit in different ways. Those who do not, however, are cast in a very unpleasant light.

Of the women who do not like Pop, Nurse Soaper has already been discussed. Her attitude is not necessarily bad because she does not like Pop, but because she takes her job seriously and does not like it when people do not obey her. However, she is still described as vastly unpleasant. There is one other woman who has also taken a kind of a dislike to Pop: Corinne Perigo – she is also someone Pop does not like:

Pop laughed and then was silent. He wasn’t going to be drawn by Mrs Perigo. There were men in every village for a radius of ten miles round who wished with all their hearts they’d never met Corinne Perigo. (GWL 51)

Mrs Perigo seems to have a bad reputation among the people. She is someone who “had in her time run off with a naval commander, a veterinary surgeon, and an agricultural inspector. The naval commander had shot himself and the inspector was in a home. . . . in the process of her adventures

the forbearing [Mr] Perigo had turned into a monosyllabic horse.” (GWL 51-52) Pop seems to think that Mrs Perigo is a dangerous woman, as he connects the ill fates of her previous men directly to her. The reader never finds out why the naval officer committed suicide or why the inspector is in a home, but the implication is that Mrs Perigo had a bad influence on them. She is not Pop’s “kind” and “something about her, more especially the voluptuous glances, irked him.” (GWL 60) Corinne Perigo’s behaviour is very straightforward and she is not subtle in expressing what she wants, and all this drives Pop further and further away from her:

At the Hunt Ball . . . she had cornered him in a half-lit draughty corridor . . . In reality it was merely an excuse to start pawing his neck. On an evening in January she had somehow winkled him out of the bar of The Hare and Hounds . . . On that occasion, without ceremony, she began pawing him all over and then turned like a snake, actually hissing, when he told her to stop it and quick. ‘You need a good belting,’ he told her on a third occasion, . . . That, she told Pop with savage sweetness, was exactly what she hoped he was going to give her. She wouldn’t rest, in fact, until he did. (GWL 79-80)

The reason why Corinne Perigo’s advances are seen as so negative is that she does not take no for an answer, and “regards sex not as wholesome pleasure but as a form of conquest” (Baldwin 221). There is much truth in this, as Mrs Perigo is very relentless in her efforts despite the fact that Pop clearly is not interested in her, and eventually tries to punish Pop for rejecting her by aiding Mrs Jerebohm press charges against Pop. However, a few things must be noted in the case of Mrs Perigo and Pop. First, no other woman comes on to Pop as actively and confidently as she does; not even Angela is so straightforward with her flirting. Second, many of the things Mrs Perigo does and which Pop finds unacceptable are also things he and Sir John have done to women: openly flirtatious glances and uncalled for touches (as with Sir John and Sister Trevelyan). The difference being, of course, that Sir John and Pop are forgiven, while Mrs Perigo is not. Third, that Mrs Perigo’s promiscuity becomes the key point in the court trial against Pop, while Pop’s reputation as a ladies’ man is ignored.

When considering Mrs Perigo’s behaviour and Pop’s negative response to it, the women he likes must be compared to Mrs Perigo. While her behaviour differs from women like Mariette and Primrose in that she apparently wishes to conquer as many men as she can, not many other aspects of

her are different. Only her attitude differentiates her from Primrose, for example. Attitude is, of course, a powerful aspect of any matter, and as Pop knows her intentions, she cannot win him over. However, she is also more active and more persistent in her actions. Even if her attitude was different, it would not at first be noticeable; rather, her behaviour would not much differ from Pop's or Sir John's – or Primrose's. Corinne Perigo differs from the likeable women in that she is not as passive, and not as delicate. Even though Mariette, Primrose, and Angela are very active characters themselves, they still have a certain coyness about them which is in keeping with the ideals of emphasized femininity: Mariette eventually succumbs to more traditional femininity by letting her husband take charge, and Primrose stops taking birth control because Mr Candy tells her to do so. Mrs Perigo seems to take orders from no one, and therefore she is not traditionally feminine enough for Pop to like her. A line is also drawn to how women are allowed to be sexual: it is acceptable to have plenty of sex with multiple men as long as one considers it simply as fun, but it is not acceptable to have sex with many men if one goes beyond that. Attitude is everything, and once a woman becomes a hunter, like Mrs Perigo, rather than a good-natured temptress, she becomes socially unacceptable although only behaving the way some of the male characters do – against the patriarchal rule:

Women are to be dominated and controlled through sex, not free to pursue an unabashed love of sex untainted by degradation or shame. If sexual promiscuity is sexual agency, that is, the active pursuit of sex by an autonomous subject, then the sexually promiscuous woman is regarded as attempting to take control of her sexual life. (LeMoncheck 59)

By taking control of her sexual life, then, Mrs Perigo is trying to break free from male domination, and it is why her action are seen as so negative.

The kind of behaviour Mrs Perigo demonstrates is not too far removed from Pop or Sir John. In the quote earlier, Mrs Perigo is touching Pop without his permission, and he finds it completely unacceptable. However, as discussed in a previous section, Pop himself becomes slightly obsessed about pinching Mrs Jerebohm despite of what she would think of it. Similarly, Sir John starts fondling

Sister Trevelyan in *A Little of What You Fancy* against her will and despite her protests. Mrs Jerebohm, although with advice from Corinne Perigo, does not accept this, but Sister Trevelyan has no objection to Sir John's behaviour in the end. The difference between Sir John and Mrs Perigo's behaviour is very difficult to discern. Both are touching someone else without their consent, but in one's case the object of the touching protests to the end, while in the other case the object learns to like this behaviour. Sir John and Mrs Perigo are not very different in that respect; neither takes no for an answer, and both are very persistent in getting what they want. In Mrs Perigo's case, sex as a form of conquest gives her a bad tone, but the reader never truly finds out how Sir John views sex. The fact that he is Angela's father assumedly means that he is a decent person, but very little is revealed about his thoughts. In any case, the woman is shamed, while the man is forgiven. This is likely a sign of the lasting patriarchy in the society, where Mrs Perigo's behaviour is seen as something that defies emphasized femininity too much:

. . . the harsher criticism that a patriarchal society lodges against the sexually promiscuous woman can be understood as intended to inhibit her pursuit of the kind of sexual activity which has long been the exclusive preserve of men and which signals rebellion against her oppressor. It is a striking feminist irony that the expression "loose woman" is both a symbol of women's degradation and profound evidence of women's attempts to liberate ourselves from the sexual dominance of men. (LeMoncheck 59)

There are, as mentioned, two examples of this liberation: the accepted, in some respects docile way of Mariette and Primrose, and the unacceptable, aggressive way of Mrs Perigo. While their attitudes are different, their actions are not – the way Mrs Perigo goes after Pop is very similar to how Primrose seduces Mr Candy.

The court case in *When the Green Woods Laugh* exemplifies how the world of the Larkins is that of a man's, and how conveniently everything goes for Pop. After Pop takes Mrs Jerebohm on a meadow, they need to hurry back because Mrs Jerebohm has a meeting with Mrs Perigo. As they get out of the boat they were travelling on, Mrs Jerebohm slips and Pop catches her:

'Neat bit o' rescue work,' Pop thought and in a moment had Pinkie in a swift and uncompromising embrace, at the same time caressing her with one hand some inches below the back waistline.

For some moments a light but intoxicating perfume of half-crushed violets, primroses, and anemones filled the air and Pinkie, almost breathless, gasped as she caught at him. At the same time her lisping mouth half opened in what Pop thought was a gesture of encouragement. Stimulated, he gave the roundest part of one thigh an extra nip of affection and was on the point of kissing her full on the lips when, to his pained surprise, she started screaming madly. (GWL 85)

Mrs Perigo happens to be present when this occurs, and encourages the distraught Mrs Jerebohm to take the matter further. This all leads to Pop being prosecuted for assault, and everyone thinks this is horrible and unjust. Everyone sides with Pop immediately – even the police officer who delivers the charges “hated doing it to Sid” (GWL 92). People siding with Pop never truly accuse Mrs Jerebohm, but Mrs Perigo, who is seen as the one setting everything up. Edith, although initially calling Mrs Jerebohm an “awful woman” (GWL 88) and saying she never liked her anyway when she hears about the charges, is quick to shift her anger to Corinne Perigo when she learns she is involved: “It’s women like her who bring disgrace on our sex” (GWL 91), she says to Pop. Worth noting here is the fact that Edith immediately blames Mrs Jerebohm for doing Pop injustice, even though Pop’s antics with women are well known and he confesses to pinching her; while Mrs Jerebohm is the victim, she is not treated as such by any character the reader is supposed to sympathise with. To Edith, pinching Mrs Jerebohm and being accused because of that is almost funny, because she was “silently wishing it might have been her” (GWL 89). Edith’s thoughts here not only belittle the distress the whole incident caused Mrs Jerebohm, but also imply that getting pinched by somebody is a good thing and nothing to be upset about. Pop is thought to be the one who is right, and Mrs Jerebohm (and Corinne Perigo) are the ones at fault. Related to this is how Sister Trevelyan behaves when Sir John is touching her in *A Little of What You Fancy*: at first, she tells him to stop and is very uncomfortable, but when Sir John does not do it anymore, she begins “to feel almost neglected when it didn’t happen” (LWYF 160) and when he does not sit next to her anymore, she is disappointed. This sends a message that being touched by men is nothing to complain about, and that women should just go with it; those who do not like it are somehow at fault.

In court, Pop makes the decision to represent himself. He has, however, aid from Uncle Perce, who shows up at the Larkins' door when he hears about Pop's charges. The case plays out in humorous light, as Pop's manners are not that of an educated lawyer, and Ma cannot contain her indignation in the court room. However, throughout the proceedings Mrs Jerebohm is very upset and nervous, and Pop manages to talk her into a corner:

‘Just two more questions,’ Pop said. ‘What did you do after the alleged attack?’

‘I screamed.’

‘Why,’ Pop said, ‘didn’t you attack me?’

‘Because you were holding both my hands.’

Pop gave the swiftest, perkiest of smiles at the same time only wishing he could telegraph it to Ma and his friends in the gallery.

‘So now,’ he said, ‘I’ve got three hands, have I?’ He held up his hand for all the court to see. ‘One to pinch you with and two to hold you with.’ Pinkie’s face had suddenly gone from extreme grey pallor to boiling crimson. ‘Adam and Eve and Pinch Me, eh? Thank you very much, Mrs Jerebohm.’ (GWL 104-105)

The reader, of course, knows what really happened. Mrs Jerebohm’s account of the incident is not quite true to the actual events, but neither is Pop’s portrayal of it, as he is denying the accusations. After Mrs Jerebohm it is Mrs Perigo’s turn to take the stand, and she is very calm and cold about the matter. After her, Pop calls Uncle Perce to the stand. Mrs Perigo’s testimony was quite solid and gathered, but Uncle Perce nullifies it all: he has seen Mrs Perigo sign in at a hotel, with another man, by the name of Mrs Lancaster. (GWL 109) Because Mrs Perigo has then been lying to either the hotel staff or the court, prosecution drops the case and Pop is acquitted, so winning the case. This causes Mrs Jerebohm to faint. That is the last the reader ever sees of the Jerebohms, and later in the series they are said to have moved out of the countryside.

The court scene plays out in very humorous tones, and the whole issue is portrayed in a very light manner. The reader knows that Pop’s intentions towards Mrs Jerebohm were far less sinister than what the court thinks they were, thus making it possible to laugh at the silly and clever ways in which Pop is trying to get himself off the hook. However, Mrs Jerebohm does not have the same information as the reader, and to her, the whole ordeal is quite stressful and embarrassing. This is understandable, as “a woman’s sexual harassment has been called her “little rape” because, among

other things, harassment involves an invasive sense of sexual violation” (LeMoncheck 166) and “sexual harassment often makes a woman feel embarrassed or ashamed, because her sexuality is made part of a public domain that she would prefer to keep private” (ibid. 187). There is a strong element of patriarchy present in the whole ordeal, as Mrs Jerebohm is seen as the one who is too sensitive to a “friendly pinch” (Baldwin 221) and Pop, well-meaning as ever, comes through the court case without any inconveniences. She gets nothing out of the matter, except more distress, and is made to feel that the whole thing was just a misunderstanding on her part. This is enforcing a view that women should not take touches so seriously:

When sexually harassed women are accused of lacking a sense of humor or misinterpreting the intent of sexual jokes or sexual touching, they are accused of politicizing sexuality by the very men whose gender dominance defines what counts as a sexual joke and what does not. (LeMoncheck 187)

Mrs Jerebohm is therefore in the wrong because she has misunderstood something, or rather she has taken something too seriously and overreacted to something innocent and supposedly fun. She is expected not to be so protective of herself and to go along with the “jokes” of the men without feeling violated or belittled.

Also worth nothing is how easily Pop can convince the court of his innocence, and how conveniently everything goes for him – Uncle Perce happens to have seen Mrs Perigo in a compromising situation, Mrs Jerebohm is too confused and distressed to remember details correctly, and everyone naturally sides with him. Nobody is bothered by Pop’s reputation – it is mentioned that there were once rumours that Pop had run off with Angela Snow (LWYF 48), and Uncle Perce starts reminiscing about those times when he was there to save Pop from other potential court cases. (GWL 95) While it is understandable that Mrs Perigo’s testimony is compromised when there is doubt of her identity, the whole incident does have a curious moral to it: women’s promiscuity is punished, while men’s is accepted; “Hence, a double standard exists where concupiscent men are complimented as *studs* or *lady’s men*, while women who engage in the same behavior are stigmatized and denigrated as *sluts* and *whores*” (Charlebois 30, italics original). Mrs Perigo is then revealed to the court as an



adulterer, which shames her, while Pop is the clever hero who uses his wits to bring her down, at the same time saving himself. Mrs Perigo and Mrs Jerebohm do not fit in the perfect patriarchal world of the novels, as one is too forward with her sexuality, and the other not enough. While other forms of defying traditional femininity – such as rejecting men’s advances – are not considered desirable to men, sexual activity, at least in theory if not always on practice, is. (Korobov 70) The women are, thus, expected to be sexually available to men, but not so much as to be the ones in charge, as “sexist gendered ideologies not only position men as aggressors in heterosexual relationships but also sanction sexual promiscuity in men and stigmatize it in women” (Charlebois 36). The answer to why Mrs Perigo’s resistance to emphasized femininity is treated so negatively may lie in the idea of masculinity itself:

When women resist emphasized femininity, their sexuality and the material reality of their bodies and desires constitute a potential threat to conventional masculinity. Men become increasingly vulnerable as restrictive femininity dissolves and women’s embodiment of multiple femininities expands. As women conform less to the stereotypical cultural notions of emphasized femininity, men must negotiate the dilemma of incorporating women’s resistance into their masculine identity projects. (Korobov 53)

Mrs Perigo is seen as the evil in the situation because with her behaviour she poses a threat to masculinity, and through that, patriarchy, because “. . . men’s achievement of masculinity is intimately dependent on, and vulnerable to, women’s complicity with emphasized femininity” (Korobov 53). This brings the matter back to traditional femininity, and how it manifests in the Larkin novels.

As previously discussed, the novels both reinforce and defy emphasized femininity with the female characters’ sexual behaviour, but it is worth noting in which ways the women defy it. The greatest way in which the female characters defy traditional femininity is to be sexually liberal, promiscuous, even. Emphasized femininity expects women to be passive and wait for male advances, essentially making men the only ones initiating sexual activity. This is clearly not the case with Mariette, Primrose, or Mrs Perigo, but very much the case with Edith and Mrs Jerebohm. However,

even though Mariette and Primrose defy emphasized femininity with their behaviour, it is not as empowering to them as it could be. Charlebois tackles the matter with the example of Marilyn Monroe, who “embodied both a compliant and resistant relationship with hegemonic masculinity. Monroe expressed self-confidence in her appearance and sexuality, but that sexual appeal was ultimately performed for a male gaze.” (27) This is an applicable portrayal of Mariette and Primrose, as well. They are extremely confident with their sexuality, but in the end everything they do is done in order to be admired and approached by men, and by trying to be as beautiful as they can be, they further enforce male dominance:

. . . femininity is constructed not only through individual body-management practices but also through men’s appraisal of women. Despite women’s efforts to modify their bodies, men possess the power to evaluate their physical attractiveness and therefore are powerfully positioned as the judges of women’s sexual appeal. (Charlebois 39)

By trying to be as confident and beautiful as they can, Mariette and Primrose only try to attract male glances; even Mrs Jerebohm falls in this category with her constant dieting. Whether she does it because she feels uncomfortable, or unattractive, in her own body is meaningless since it is the patriarchal society setting the standard for female beauty, and therefore her wanting to change herself is not truly for her own sake, but for men’s.

It is not always the men who approach women in the novels, as evidenced by Mariette and Primrose, and their respective spouses. However, it is curious how men such as Mr Charlton and Mr Candy, both described as physically rather weak, and shy and nervous in attitude, have sexy women all over them without trying. This can be seen as a way to fight the traditional idea of a masculine man, who is strong, muscular, and sure of himself. Mr Charlton and Mr Candy are not that kind of men, and still manage to get themselves traditionally feminine, gorgeous women. However, this notion is slightly undermined by the fact that the same treatment does not concern women: Edith does not have gorgeous men swarming around her. While defying traditional masculinity, these examples support emphasized femininity: it is acceptable for average men to get sexy wives, while the average women get nothing. This is also an example of how male fantasy manifests in the novels: men do not

need to be physically fit or especially good-looking to get women – they barely need to do anything for the opposite sex to be attracted to them. Mariette and Primrose both find themselves men who are quite average in that they are not especially good-looking, strong, or successful, and Pop himself is not especially attractive himself, yet almost every woman finds him irresistible. Thus, Pop can get the best of both worlds – the security of a marriage, and the joys of bachelorhood. He has no problem, however, with committing primarily to Ma, and he respects her more than anyone. He is both representing a carefree, womanizing male, and also holding on to traditional family values. This, on its part, reinforces the aspect of male fantasy and emphasized femininity within the novels: men are able to live in both worlds, while women are confined to one – and should they attempt the same as men, they are shamed like Mrs Perigo.

## **6. Conclusion**

The Larkin novels are both a product of their own era, and ahead of their time in ideals. The female characters are portrayed in two ways: independent and active, and dependent and passive. The women in the novels are objectified in many ways, through the actions of other characters or through the descriptions given of them. The physical aspect of the women is greatly emphasized, and the more beautiful a character is, the better she is as a person. This becomes evident when examining the unattractive female characters: the beautiful women are described as much more pleasant and confident than the average-looking women. Emphasized femininity is a key concept when examining the characters, and it is something that is supported by the descriptions of the women. The more traditionally feminine a female character is, the more attractive she is to the male characters in the novels, and better as a woman. An exception to this is Ma, who does not represent the beauty ideals of the 1950s and the 1960s physically, but is still desirable to male characters: she both defies

traditional femininity, but also acts as a comic relief, as her size is constantly referred to and made fun of. She can, however, also be seen as social commentary: she defies the beauty ideals prevalent in the society, and yet is no less attractive than the women who fit those ideals. Objectification and emphasized femininity are closely related in that the male characters, especially Pop, see the women as their privilege. Pop touches his female acquaintances liberally and this is generally seen as nothing strange. Through his behaviour, the female characters are objectified in seven ways as identified by Martha C. Nussbaum.

Although the female characters are heavily objectified and their femininity is in many ways traditional and encouraged, there is also power and resource they gain through this. Mariette and Primrose are very active characters, and ones who know what they want and are not afraid to work to obtain it. Mariette's behaviour is likened to prostitution at one point, and she is not made the victim in the situation. The women who are sexually confident are generally very independent and sexually assertive, often the ones baffling men with their straightforward ways. However, those women who are not described as attractive cannot use their sexuality as resource, because they are not desirable in the eyes of men. Women like Edith Pilchester have other means of demonstrating power, be it physical or mental. Because being sexual is not an option for them, their intellect or physical strength becomes more prominent. However, the novels still do not treat them in such a positive way as they do the attractive women, making it seem like beauty is more desirable in a woman than intellect or loyalty, for example. Women both gain and lose control through their bodies; while they can use their sexuality to their advantage, they still relinquish power over themselves to men on occasion, as Primrose with Mr Candy with the matter of birth control. The female characters have two sides to them: one that defies emphasized femininity through being openly sexual, and another that conforms to it by letting men take charge of their bodies and lives.

Virginity was in the 1950s and the 1960s seen as an ideal for young women, but the novels give very little value to the concept. The female characters who are virgins are stigmatized more than

those who are expected to be virgins, but who are not. Virginity is treated almost as an anomaly, as Mariette and Primrose are sexually active at a very young age and other characters do not mind this; rather, it is the society that is trying to make them value virginity, while the characters themselves do not do so. While age is a factor in how the characters and their virginity is portrayed, generally the whole concept does not get much praise within the novels. Even religious reasons do not make virginity acceptable to some characters, as with Angela trying to “cure” her virginal sister during their holiday in France. Virginity is mostly seen as a divider between girlhood and adulthood, and the women who are not virgins are seen almost as incomplete, regardless of their age. The non-virgins are more confident, happy, and relaxed than those who have held on to their virginity, their gift that has now become a stigma for them. Free sexuality is encouraged, and virginity does not fit this atmosphere, making it something that should be gotten rid of. This can be seen as a masculine way of looking at the matter, as virginity is more often a stigma for men than it is for women.

The Larkin novels take a very progressive stand when it comes to marriage. The main couple, Ma and Pop, are not married and never get married. They do not care what the society thinks about their private life, and are happy and comfortable in their relationship despite it not having a legal status. While Ma and Pop fall into the traditional male-female roles, they are also very equal in their relationship, both sexually and mentally. However, there is an air of marriage not being completely unwanted on Ma’s part, as she refers to marriage in a positive way several times during the series. In the 1950s and the 1960s, marriage was still the norm and often something women especially desired due to limited options for them otherwise. Pop is less keen on the idea of getting married, which on its part reflects the gender difference. While in some ways progressive with the ideals of marriage, the novels still reinforce traditional gender roles and patriarchy in the way Mr Charlton and Mariette’s relationship develops, for example. The idea of the husband being assertive and masculine and the wife compliant and docile is reinforced when Mariette and Mr Charlton’s marriage problems are

solved with him telling her what to do and giving her no other options, thus reinforcing traditional values.

Infidelity in a relationship is dealt with in a very modern light, as Ma and Pop live in what could be called a sexually open relationship. They do not care about the traditional institution of marriage, and are very relaxed with extradyadic relationships. Infidelity is mostly seen as emotional connection, while the physical side is not taken too seriously. However, Ma does not demonstrate the same kind of promiscuity as Pop does, and her eventually staying loyal enforces the traditional gender roles and emphasized femininity: women do not get the same liberty with extradyadic relations as men do, even though the novels imply that this is the case. While the novels portray a traditional monogamous marriage as something that is not necessary for a good relationship, they also support men's extradyadic affairs more than women's.

To conclude and to summarize the answers to the research questions set for this thesis, the Larkin novels oppose the societal norms of the 1950s and the 1960s by being very open about sexuality and relationships, showing women being sexually assertive, and treating sex as a natural part of life. However, they also conform to the norms of their time by supporting traditional gender roles and in some ways family values, and by not truly giving the female characters the right to be as sexually open as men. Female sexuality is treated in a positive light in that it is not disapproved of, and is encouraged in many ways. It is still seen, however, as something that is positive to men as well, and when it is not to their liking, it becomes a negative issue. This is a way in which the novels portray male fantasy: in addition to everything working out in the male characters' and the patriarchal society's advantage, the women are mostly there to please men in one way or another. Women are expected to be sexually available, but not so much as to threaten masculinity: they are not supposed to oppose male advances, but if they are too assertive with their sexual intentions, they are shamed. Emphasized femininity is enforced and sexual harassment of women is belittled. The novels reflect the decades they were written in and provide social commentary in regards to the phenomena of their

time, such as prostitution, marriage, and sexuality, and often differ from the general opinion in these ways.

There is also relevance to our time in the novels, as themes such as virginity and femininity are still issues today. This relevance is also noteworthy when considering which aspects described in the novels have changed and which have not: the Larkins have liberal ideas about marriage for their time, and for our time living out of wedlock is not unusual. However, should we have progressed more since then? Marriage is still a prominent aspect of people's lives, and much weight is given to it. Similarly, the value of virginity is seen lessening in the novels, and yet young girls are often expected to stay virgins until adulthood even to this day; they are expected to preserve their *gift*. Much of this deals with the ideals of femininity and patriarchy, as well – perhaps the progress that seemed to be happening in the Larkin novels has stalled since, and our modern society in some ways still upholds some the values of the 1950s and the 1960s. The fact that the Larkin novels have relevance today in regards of the themes discussed in this thesis show that there is still room for progress in our time.

In this thesis I have explored the portrayal of the female characters both in relation to historical aspects and the male characters within the novels themselves. While I have studied many different aspects of the novels, there are still plenty of topics to focus on should the novels be examined further. These include the concept of family and the symbolism of nature in the novels, for example. The results of the thesis were largely as I expected them to be at the start of the research; however, the extent of the objectification of women and the role of emphasized femininity within the whole series exceeded expectations. This also on its part lessened the progressive feel of the series, as many aspects of the Larkin stories are so obviously marked by traditional, and sometimes dated, gender roles and values.

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